

Plastic Recognition: The Politics and Aesthetics of Facial Representation from Silent
Cinema to Cognitive Neuroscience

by

Abraham Geil

Program in Literature
Duke University

Date: _____

Approved:

Mark B.N. Hansen, Co-Supervisor

Gregory Flaxman, Co-Supervisor

Fredric Jameson

Jane Gaines

Inga Pollmann

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Plastic Recognition traces a critical genealogy of the human face in cinema and its afterlives. By rethinking the history of film theory through its various investments in the face, it seeks to intervene not only in the discipline of film studies but more broadly within contemporary political and scientific discourse. This dissertation contends that the face is a privileged site for thinking through the question of recognition, a concept that cuts across a range of aesthetic, political, philosophical, and scientific thought.

Plastic Recognition examines this intimate link between the face and recognition through a return to “classical” film theory, and specifically to the first generation of European and Soviet film theorists’ preoccupation with the face in silent cinema. In the process, it recasts the canonical debate over cinematic specificity between Béla Balázs and Sergei Eisenstein as an antagonism between two opposing conceptions of the face in film: transparent universalism versus plastic typicality. Of these two conceptions, this project contends that the “Balázsian” idea of a transparently expressive face assumes cultural dominance in the latter half of the 20th century by virtue of its essential commensurability with the political and social ideal of mutual recognition that has come to prevail in the United States and Western Europe in the context of neoliberalism. Alongside and against this dominant tendency, the “Eisensteinian” insistence upon the plasticity of aesthetic form provides a radical alternative to the idealist metaphysics of

immediacy underlying both the “Balázsian” notion of the cinematic face and the ideal of mutual recognition it exemplifies. That insistence forces into view the ways that recognition itself is always contingent upon aesthetic and technological practices, even (or especially) when it is brokered by that seemingly most immediate of images—the human face. By adopting this approach as its basic critical orientation, this dissertation attempts to restage the problem of recognition as fundamentally about the historicity of plastic form. The project concludes by turning to a scientific scene of recognition in which the “Balázsian” conception of the face makes an uncanny reappearance. The final chapter examines several studies in contemporary neuroscience that use representations of the human face as experimental stimuli in an effort to establish a neurophysiological basis for the mutual recognition of empathy.

Dedication

For Laura, Dominick, Raphael

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1. Introduction

I shall say that a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings one back into it.

–Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*¹

Over the past two decades, the Hegelian term “recognition” has re-emerged as a line of demarcation in contemporary political thought. It was put squarely back on the agenda in the wake of the global political transformations of 1989, and this context seems to have over-determined not only the centrality of the term for political discourse but also the limits of its conceptualization.² The self-declared triumph of neoliberalism fostered a common sense within mainstream political thought that made recognition into an index for social justice. By 2005, this idea had been sufficiently codified to appear in the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* in the term’s very definition: “Recognition by others, or by the law or by the State is a clear ground of well-being, and its absence one of the most damaging

¹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Noonday Press, 1972), 112.

² 1992 marked the beginning of a wave of publications on recognition, with the appearance of three major works on the topic: Axel Honneth’s *Kampf um Anerkennung* (published in English translation as *The Struggle for Recognition* just three years later); Charles Taylor’s hugely influential essay “The Politics of Recognition”; and Francis Fukuyama’s neoliberal manifesto *The End of History and the Last Man*. A partial list of major works that followed this initial publishing explosion includes: Robert Williams’s massive *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition* (1997); Alexander Garcia Düttmann’s polemic *Between Cultures: Tensions in the Struggle for Recognition* (2000); the transatlantic debate between Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth presented in the volume *Redistribution or Recognition?* (2003); Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005); and Paul Ricoeur’s last book *The Course of Recognition* (2005).

of privations.”³ At the same time, this elevation of recognition to the status of an essential social good has produced any number of antagonists: from materialist critiques of its implementation in state policies,⁴ to axiomatic rejections on philosophical grounds,⁵ to the critique of recognition as an instrument of biopolitics.⁶ A more general strain of anti-recognition discourse rose to prominence during this period under the rubric of an “ethics of alterity,” which had as its core principle the unassimilability of the Other to mutual recognition. And more recently, an active refusal of recognition has become the central tenet in the counterpolitics of invisibility or indiscernibility.⁷

My project does not seek to enter directly into the terms of this debate. Rather, I propose to take up the problem of recognition via a dimension which I contend remains under-thought in contemporary theories of recognition and anti-recognition alike—that of aesthetic form. This omission of form from serious consideration is not just a matter of

³ Simon Blackburn, “Recognition” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁴ Elizabeth Povinelli, *Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002.

⁵ “No light is shed on any concrete situation by the notion of the ‘recognition of the other.’” Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. Trans. Peter Hallward. London and New York: Verso, 2002. p. 27.

⁶ Pheng Cheah, “The Biopolitics of Recognition: Making Female Subjects of Globalization,” *Boundary 2* 40, no. 2 (June 20, 2013): 81–112.

⁷ See, for example: Irving Goh, “Prolegomenon to a Right to Disappear,” *Cultural Politics* Volume 2, Issue 1, 2006; Édouard Glissant, “The Thinking of the Opacity of the World,” *Frieze d/e* No. 7 Winter 2012; and Nicholas De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

neglect but in fact constitutes a basic condition of possibility for the perpetuation of debates that have in the view of many (myself included) long grown repetitive and stale. To be clear, by aesthetic form I mean to designate something quite other than the means of representation through which individuals or groups may solicit or refuse, be granted or denied, recognition—all of which is already explicitly addressed in the existing discourse. I am interested in recognition as a *politics of form* that is not finally reducible to a politics of representation. My conception of form here is indebted to the concept of “plasticity” elaborated by the contemporary French philosopher Catherine Malabou. In Malabou’s account of the concept, plasticity shares with recognition its modern provenance in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and, like recognition, it cuts across aesthetic, political, and now scientific thought. Because it designates the capacity to seize, retain, and destroy form, plasticity introduces a model of change and becoming that exceeds the static logic of identity and difference that has largely determined the conceptual history of recognition. To think recognition through the plasticity of form is finally to think recognition itself as plasticity: that is, to think recognition as the three-fold capacity to seize, to retain, and to destroy the material form of an encounter. By claiming that the current discourses of recognition and its discontents share a basic refusal to contend with plasticity, I am, in effect accusing them of holding to an idealist conception of form. We can illustrate this with two brief examples.

The first comes from Charles Taylor’s seminal essay, “The Politics of

Recognition" (1992). For an image of his ideal "regime of reciprocal recognition among equals," Taylor turns in this essay to Rousseau's famous critique of the theater in *Letter to M. D'Alembert*.⁸ Against theater's separation of actor and spectator, Rousseau holds up the ideal of mutuality epitomized in the Republican festival held outdoors, in which the physical separation of the elevated stage is replaced with the circular movement around the Maypole:

Plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square; gather the people together there, and you will have a festival. Do better yet; let the spectators become an entertainment to themselves; make them actors themselves; do it so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united.⁹

Taylor's choice of this Rousseauian scene is telling. If the ideal of mutual recognition is immediacy, it nevertheless requires a mediating form. Rousseau must of course *stage* the abolishment of theater. But the form he chooses to do so—the Maypole—must also erase its mediating function so as to remove all traces of separation between self and others (between self-love and other-love) because mediation already implies a separation to be bridged.

My second example comes from the discourse of anti-recognition. In a recent discussion of the contemporary politics of invisibility, Alex Galloway links the tactics of

⁸ Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition" in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 50.

⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Politics and the Arts, Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theatre*. (Glencoe: Free Press, 1960). p. 126; qtd. in *ibid.*, 47-8.

computer hackers to obscure their activities from governmental surveillance (what he calls “black box” tactics) with the tactics of “black bloc” protestors who anonymize themselves by obscuring their faces, dressing in uniform black clothing, and moving as single blocs through large public demonstrations. At the end of his discussion, Galloway asks what relation we ought to take up to these phenomena that, by obscuring their inner workings, are devised to block recognition:

What is this black box—this black bloc—that fills the world with husks and hulls and camouflage and crime? Is it our enemy, or are we on the side of it? Is this just a new kind of nihilism? Not at all, it is the purest form of love.¹⁰

In this image of blackness as pure opacity, we have the reverse image of Rousseau’s scene of mutual transparency. Yet what this opacity yields for Galloway is no less the immediacy of an encounter—how else are we to understand his final invocation of “the purest form of love”? The difference here is that the figure brokering this immediacy is one of separation rather than communion.

If there is a symmetry between these diametrically opposed examples, it is because, having assumed that mediation is the proper role for form to play in recognition, they both posit a formal figure for mediation-at-its-limit—whether the fusion of the Maypole dance (the limit of mediation as success) or the blockage of the black box/blocs (the limit of mediation as failure)—at which point that figure effectively ceases to function as a

¹⁰ Alexander R. Galloway, “Black Box, Black Bloc.” Text for a lecture given at the New School in New York City on April 12, 2010

mediator and dissolves into an immediate expression of the idealist position (pure mutuality or pure alterity, respectively) that the scene of encounter is meant to stage in the first place.

If both the ideal of recognition and its negation aspire to an idealist condition of immediacy, I contend that the face is the privileged figure for staging this paradoxical mediation of immediacy. As an example of this use of the face from the history of cinema, one that manages to operate both sides of the opposition above, consider the 1956 version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (dir. Don Siegel). Set in a small American town, the film's narrative is set in motion by some bizarre complaints the local doctor is hearing from his patients. They express a common refrain about the profound change in an intimate: my sister is not my sister, my husband is not my husband, my mother is not my mother, and so on. Everything about her is the same, but it is not *her*. As we come to learn, of course, these are not delusions as the doctor initially thinks; these people are in fact being replaced by some form of alien vegetal life. The invisible marker of the inhuman by which the townspeople know their loved ones are replicants is, in effect, the absence of mutual recognition. Their appearance is identical, but the accustomed intuition of their interiority is blocked. When the film wants to intensify this subjective experience of blockage, it needs only to show the close-up of a face.

Within the Cold War ideology of the film, this device of non-recognition as the sign of the Inhuman/Communist functions as a negative proof for an essentially liberal norm of

mutual recognition, one capable of performing a dual function: securing the communitarianism of family and small town bonds while also preserving the sanctity of the individual. No doubt this is an instructive instance of the political uses of the face in cinema. For our purposes, however, the more basic question is how the face as an aesthetic form can be made to operate recognition's binary of mediation/immediacy so perfectly. For just as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* uses the face to provide its ideological narrative with a kind of sensible proof, we could also say that this narrative rescues an ideology of the face by explaining away a discomfiting truth about the sensible reality of the face in cinema *as such*—that it is only ever a surface. To the more general anxiety over this fact, *Body Snatchers* provides the narrative resolution of an alien takeover.

The face is arguably the most potent and politically ambiguous emblem of “the human.” What animates its potency along with its ambiguity is an underlying dialectic of abstraction and particularity. As an abstract signifier, the face offers the promise of fusing the singularity of the individual with the generality of the species; particular faces, however, always bear the cultural and historical freight of the visible markers of gender, race, ethnicity, and age that cut across and against the categories of individual or species. These tensions have led philosophers and critical theorists of various stripes (e.g., Levinas, Deleuze, Butler) to adopt the face as a paradigmatic figure for considerations of identity and difference —the twin poles of recognition. As I argue, however, such purely conceptual appropriations of the face tend to simply reinforce the tendency in recognition

discourses to erase the material and historical dimensions of the concept. Rather than reading faces as readymade images for a fixed concept of recognition, I approach them historically as conflictual sites where the paradoxical core of recognition—its unstable alignment of the universal and particular—appears in its full contingency. My study of the face thus restages the problem of recognition as fundamentally about the historicity of form.

Having traced the theoretical problem that animates this study, I will now turn briefly to the disciplinary considerations that inform my choice and organization of materials as a film scholar who is interested in forging an encounter between film theory and political theory. If political theorists of recognition (and anti-recognition) have tended to ignore the plasticity of aesthetic form, the discipline of film studies, despite its longstanding interest in the psychoanalytic category of “identification,” has paid little attention to the more capacious concept of recognition as it has appeared in critical theory. My project addresses these mutual blind spots by asserting: first, that the concept of recognition requires an aesthetic supplement in order to give it consistency and shape; and second, that the face in cinema assumes a privileged status as just such a supplement. Perhaps nowhere has this conjuncture been registered so intensely or explored as searchingly than in the writings of the first generation of film theorists who encountered in the gargantuan, mute faces of silent cinema a radically new visualization of humanity. By returning to this period of so-called “classical film theory,” we can find resources for

thinking through the linked problematic of recognition and the face, not only with respect to silent cinema but to a broad range of aesthetic and technological practices up to and including the practices of cognitive neuroscience.

I begin by recasting the canonical debate between Béla Balázs and Sergei Eisenstein as an antagonism between two conceptions of the face in film—expressive universalism versus plastic typicality—which amount finally to two conceptions of form. Of the two opposing conceptions of the face I isolate in early film theory, my project contends that the “Balázsian” idea of a transparently expressive face assumes cultural dominance within the context of neoliberal recognition that prevails in the United States and Western Europe during the latter half of the 20th century. Alongside and against this dominant lineage, the “Eisensteinian” emphasis on the intelligibility of plastic form poses a radical alternative because it forces into view the fact that recognition itself is always contingent upon form, even (or especially) when it is brokered by that seemingly most immediate and singular of forms—the human face.

The dissertation concludes by turning to a scientific scene of recognition in which the “Balázsian” face makes an uncanny reappearance in recent neuroscience experiments on so-called “mirror neurons” that purport to demonstrate a neurophysiological basis for mutual recognition or “empathy.” Although “neuroplasticity” has become a central concept in contemporary neuroscience, these experiments do not consider plasticity in relation to the facial images they use as

stimulus triggers; for neuroscientific researchers, plasticity is simply not a property that extends to the aesthetic dimension of facial images. Accordingly, even as these experiments manage to discover hitherto unknown potentials of the brain, the radical implications of these discoveries are reduced to static conceptions of morality and beauty inherited from a liberal conception of recognition. My ambition here is not so much to “unmask” the ideological operations of these experiments as it is to dislodge their findings from their prevailing contexts of interpretation. By bringing this complex and conflicted lineage in film theory to bear upon a central but largely unexamined element of these experiments —the image of the face—I attempt a transvaluation of the terms in which their findings are understood.

Chapter Descriptions

Following Chapter One (“Introduction”), Chapter Two (“Static Recognition: Physiognomy in Béla Balázs’s *Visible Man*”) examines a desire in early film theory to make the face in silent cinema into the manifestation of immediate recognition. This chapter centers on the work of the Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs (1884-1949), whose 1924 book *Der Sichtbare Mensch* (*Visible Man*) hails silent cinema as a new universal language, a machine for teaching (or re-learning) a universally recognizable semiotics of facial expression, which, through its dissemination in the world market for film, would eventually erode the isolating barriers of national languages. Even if this trope of a “universal language” was commonplace in discussions of early cinema, I

argue that Balázs takes it the furthest by positing cinematic specificity as the antinomy of verbal language. Beyond simply privileging the expressivity of the face in silent cinema as the pre-eminent site of non-linguistic communication, he makes the organic unity and meaning of the face—captured in his key term “physiognomy”—into the transcendental condition of cinematic perception as such. I claim that the consequence of this totalization of cinematic specificity is paradoxically to annul the material form of film. For Balázs at the moment the medium realizes its essential specificity—in the “polyphony” of a moving face in close-up—it dissolves into the univocal expression of a human essence. Despite his pervasive efforts to identify cinematic movement with Goethe’s conception of morphological form, I argue that Balázs’s conception of cinema as “physiognomic vision” ultimately returns to the static classicism of Lavater.

Chapter Three (“Eisenstein’s Formal Ecstasy: Typage and Plasticity”) takes up the Soviet filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein’s concept of *typage*, which emphasizes a mask-like or caricature face of social types in cinema whose intelligibility depends on a certain formal opacity and rigidity. Reading the debate between Eisenstein and Balázs over montage as more fundamentally about the question of cinematic movement, I argue that it is Eisenstein’s apparently static use of the face that offers greater possibilities for a form that can accommodate change and becoming than Balázs’s vitalist investment in the “polyphony” of the cinematic face as the direct intuition of movement. Against the idea of a fundamental break between the early and

late Eisenstein, this chapter draws a line of continuity by putting his use of animal types in his first film *Strike* (1925) into a direct relation with his very late writings on animals in Disney and what he terms the “plasmaticness” of form.

Chapter Four (“Neuro-Recognition: Mirror Neurons and the Immediacy of the Face”) critically examines a series of experiments by the neurologist Marco Iacoboni and several of his students which seek to demonstrate the existence of so-called “mirror neurons” in humans as a neurological basis for sociality. These studies all claim, as Iacoboni puts it, that we are “wired for empathy.” I consider how these claims follow from the use of facial images as experimental stimuli in these studies. This chapter brings my study full circle by demonstrating how these contemporary experiments reproduce the rhetoric of early 20th-century claims about the universally recognizable language of facial expression in silent film. Moreover, it suggests a method for preserving what is most interesting about these experiments while dislodging their findings from the interpretive framework of mutual recognition.

2. Static Recognition: Physiognomy in Béla Balázs's *Visible Man*

When man finally becomes visible, he will always be able to recognize himself, despite the gulf between widely differing languages.

—Béla Balázs, *Visible Man* (1924)

Whenever and wherever it is possible to speak of recognition, there is eo ipso a prior hiddenness.

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (1843)

2.1 Introduction

If there is a *locus classicus* for the discussion of the face in cinema, it is no doubt the work of the Hungarian-born writer and film theorist Béla Balázs. From his first two books of film theory, *Der sichtbare Mensch* (*Visible Man*, 1924) and *Der Geist des Films* (*The Spirit of Film*, 1930), to his consolidation and revision of these two works in *Iskusstvo Kino* (originally published in Russian in 1942 and translated as *Theory of Film* in 1952), Balázs insists that the image of the face is not merely one of cinema's most privileged objects but that it also defines the very specificity of film as a technological and artistic medium in its capacity for "physiognomic" perception. Film theorists and philosophers as wide ranging as Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Aumont, and Mary Ann Doane, have all placed these poetic writings at the center of their respective accounts of the cinematic face in film

history and theory.¹ This reception of Balázs's work has tended to take his use of physiognomy as a rather eccentric term of art. Less attention has been paid to the way that Balázs's definition of film as "the art of physiognomy" is bound up in his grandiose vision of a humanist internationalism for which he proposes cinema as the prime mover. As I argue in this chapter, what lies at the center of this vision is an idea of the human face—and by extension cinema itself—as the emblem of immediacy, a form of recognition without negativity.

This means a mode of recognition that stands in absolute opposition to verbal language, even as Balázs uses the then-common trope of film as a "universal language" to express that opposition. The narrative of loss and redemption within which he places the advent of silent cinema makes language into the historical agent of humanity's self-alienation. In a culture dominated by the abstract rationality of the printed word, "[t]he immediately visible spirit was ... transformed into a mediated audible spirit" (11). The result, Balázs's narrative goes, is a depletion of the stratum of the human soul that can only be expressed in bodily gesture. That stratum is a kind of deep, non-verbal well that

¹ See: Jacques Aumont, *Du visage au cinéma*. Paris: Editions de l'Etoile, 1992; Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986; Mary Ann Doane, "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2003): 89–111.

risks drying up at the very moment when the art of film arrives on the scene “like a new sensory organ” to replenish it.² In cinemas across the globe:

the whole of mankind is now busy relearning the long-forgotten language of gestures and facial expressions. This language is not the substitute for words characteristic of the sign language of the deaf and dumb, but the visual corollary of human souls immediately made flesh. *Man will become visible once again.* (10)

By redeeming humankind “from the curse of Babel” (14), the dissemination of the universal language of this new art form on the world market promises nothing less than to break down the divisions of national languages and eventually to overcome sectarianism entirely. Balázs therefore casts his vision of this “visible man” in explicitly internationalist terms.

Balázs turns to physiognomy as the form of meaning by which cinema can displace language. Physiognomy and language are defined by two sets of antinomies which run through the entirety of *Visible Man*: physiognomy is the name for the concrete, the immediate, the natural, and the universal; language for the abstract, the mediate, the arbitrary, and the partial. These oppositions remain static throughout the text, with no third term emerging to mediate them. In a sense, his project precludes that as a possibility by totalizing mediation itself on only one side of this opposition. But this binds Balázs’s physiognomic conception of cinema’s specificity in a paradox. For at the

² Béla Balázs, *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory. Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*. Ed. Erica Carter; Trans. Rodney Livingstone. New York and Oxford: Berghan Books, 2010. p. 5. All parenthetical page citations below refer to this text.

moment when cinema is expressing its essential character as medium—exemplified for Balázs in the close-up of a moving face—it is thought to effectively dissolve as a medium altogether in the immediate expression of human essence. This paradox, which reaches a particular intensity in Balázs’s writing, is not unique to it. The dream of immediate mediation, of a form that would transcend form, is a constitutive feature of certain ideal of recognition.

2.2 Between History and Expressivity: Balázs’s Paradox of Form

The political promise of cinema is inseparable from its historical emergence as a mass art. Thinking through the implications of this idea was the pressing task that Béla Balázs’s generation of leftist European intellectuals set themselves when they took up the challenge of writing about film in the 1920s.³ We can invoke the stakes of this period’s political configuration simply by designating the world-historical events of 1917 and 1933 as a frame. Between the October Revolution and the Third Reich, these were the years when the mass art of cinema brought the masses, as Walter Benjamin put it, face to face with themselves. For Benjamin and his cohort of German-Jewish thinkers, the question of cinema’s politics and aesthetics was necessarily bound up in the larger project of making intelligible the dialectical tendencies of the increasingly catastrophic history they were living through.

³ For thinkers like Alain Badiou, this remains a pressing task. See, for example: “Cinema as a Democratic Emblem.” *MR Zine* (online): 5/6/09.

During these same years—now periodized in the academic discipline of film studies under the rubric “classical” film theory—there also emerged an entirely separate and distinct approach to the question of cinema’s specificity. This was a time of tremendous productivity for a more poetic mode of writing about film, exemplified in the work of the so-called *photogénie* theorists in France.⁴ For this group of writers and filmmakers, cinema’s defining quality was its power of expressivity: its capacity, that is, to express not history but nature, essences rather than the masses. The close-up was elevated as the technique *par excellence* for realizing this capacity, and it became indissolubly associated with that most expressive of objects—the face. By revealing the latent expressivity of inanimate objects or of body parts like the back or hands, the close-up seemingly transformed everything into a face (a phenomenon Gilles Deleuze would later name “facialization”).⁵

Balázs’s *Visible Man* may well represent the one substantial point of contemporaneous contact between these two otherwise distinct and mutually indifferent theoretical strains in early film theory. Key aspects of both orientations coexist in *Visible Man*. We can see evidence of this coexistence still, in the split between two

⁴ The most prominent figures associated with the idea of *photogénie* in this period were Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein, but the term had a broad currency in early French film theory. See: Richard Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism: Vol. 1, 1907-1929*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

characterizations of Balázs by contemporary film scholars. One study describes his film theory as “the first systematic analysis of film under capitalism.”⁶ In another, he is given the title of “poet-laureate of the filmic close-up.”⁷ And certainly Balázs’s work provides material for both descriptions. On the one hand, he argues for the necessity of theorizing film on the grounds that it is the first popular art form, by which he means that it is the first art not to be monopolized by a cultural elite. Moreover, he employs a Marxist terminology at several important moments in his analysis, which gives it at least a superficial resemblance to the writing of thinkers like Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin. And like them, Balázs recognizes the historically consequential appearance of the masses in cinema. On the other hand, his characterization of the *appearance* of this appearance, so to speak, is aligned with the second orientation I’ve identified. He calls this appearance a “physiognomy” of the masses, something that he argues is best produced by cross-cutting between long shots of crowds and close-ups of individual faces. Finally, he uses an idealist language of the “soul” akin to *photogénie* theorists like the young Jean Epstein for describing the close-up’s capacity to reveal an invisible essence.

⁶ Sabine Hake, *The Cinema’s Third Machine: Writing on Film in Germany, 1907-1933*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993. p.220.

⁷ Robert Stam, *Film Theory*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000. p. 61. This follows closely Dudley Andrew’s much earlier characterization of Balázs in his classic *The Major Film Theories: An Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. Sabine Hake argues against such characterizations of Balázs, which she sees as overly formalist. See: *The Cinema’s Third Machine*.

My point in describing the presence of these two strains in Balázs's film theory is not, however, to demonstrate their successful reconciliation in *Visible Man*. The fact is that Balázs does not even attempt to reconcile them, nor does he give any indication that there might be an antagonism in the first place. I would argue, in fact, that much of the unsystematic and often self-contradictory quality of his arguments (something even sympathetic readers have noted from the time of their publication onward) results from Balázs's core belief that these radically different orientations to the art of film—the dialectical materialist and the expressivist / revelationist—flow from the same source.⁸ Perhaps the most apt historical label for this belief would be Marxist Humanism, if we take that broadly as naming an orientation to Marx's early writings that stresses the alienation from a previous condition of human "species being."⁹ When he invokes a Marxist framework, typically at the beginning and end of his books, Balázs describes film's expressivity as the historical means for redressing this historically produced

⁸ In an otherwise quite favorable review of *The Spirit of Film*, Rudolph Arnheim chides Balázs for the failure to follow through with his ideas: "Balázs provides us with all the materials needed for a superlative aesthetics of film. The book that he has not written is outstanding." "Der Geist des Films," *Die Weltbühne*, Jg. 26, H. 46 (Nov. 11th, 1930): 723-4. Translated in *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory*, p. 234. To cite a contemporary example, Jacques Aumont calls *Visible Man* an "aesthetic-critical patchwork" which is "not a book of theory—not a thesis in form, not an articulated argument, and not without its occasional contradictions." "The Face in Close-up," p. 129.

⁹ It is, however, somewhat anachronistic to apply this label to a thinker in the 1920s, given that the humanist reading of Marx was not fully available until after the *Paris Manuscripts* were released in 1932 by Soviet researchers. It would thus be more precise to call Balázs a proto-Marxist Humanist.

alienation. He simply presumes that his belief in cinema's capacity to provide immediate access to the human "soul" follows seamlessly from this Marxist framework.

Even a cursory sketch of Balázs's intellectual biography suggests the basic fusion of a literary humanism with revolutionary Marxism in his formation. Born Herbert Bauer in 1884 to a bilingual German-Hungarian Jewish family in the Hungarian town of Szeged, he came to understand himself as, in the words of his biographer, "an *international* artist and a humanist beyond national boundaries."¹⁰ As a sign of his commitment to Hungarian vernacular culture, he assumed the penname Béla Balázs when he first began to publish his writings as a teenager. In Budapest, he produced a variety of literary and theatrical works, including a libretto for Béla Bartók's opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* in 1912. Together with his close friend Georg Lukács, he founded the famous Sunday Circle, a collection of intellectuals and artists who met on Sunday afternoons at Balázs's house. He joined the Hungarian Socialist Party in 1918 and, having become increasingly convinced by the goals of revolutionary communism, participated directly in Béla Kun's short-lived Soviet Republic of 1919 as the head of the literary department for its Governing Council. When the Republic collapsed, he was forced to flee along with Lukács to Vienna where, in 1922, he began writing the film criticism that would lead to *Visible Man*. From there he moved to Berlin in 1926, wrote

¹⁰ Joseph Zsuffa, *Béla Balázs: The Man and The Artist*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

The Spirit of Film (1930), joined the Communist Party, and ultimately emigrated to the Soviet Union in 1931.¹¹

Critical approaches to Balázs's film theory tend to take one of two general tacks. On the one hand, (mostly Germanist) scholars have engaged in an historicist effort to reconstruct the intellectual and cultural influences (e.g. Simmel, Bergson, *Lebensphilosophie*, Viennese café culture, phenomenology) that formed the background to *Visible Man* and his other books of film theory.¹² On the other, (mostly Anglo-American) film studies scholars have tried to situate it within a set of disciplinary debates taken to unfold throughout a broadly construed history of film theory.¹³ And, of course, each approach partakes in some mixture of the other.¹⁴ While eminently useful in their own right (and indispensable to this study), I would argue that both of these approaches stand in a certain external relation to Balázs's film theory. They do so by virtue of a

¹¹ For biographical sources on Balázs see: Joseph Zsuffa, *Béla Balázs: The Man and The Artist*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987; Hanno Loewy, *Béla Balázs: Märchen, Ritual und Film*. Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2003.

¹² For examples of this approach, see: Hake, *Cinema's Third Machine*; Hanno Loewy, "Space, Time, and 'Rites de Passage': Béla Balázs's Paths to Film." *October* 115 (Winter 2006): 61-76; Hanno Loewy, *Béla Balázs: Märchen, Ritual und Film*. Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2003.

¹³ For examples of this approach, see: Andrew, *Major Film Theories*; Stam, *Film Theory*; Mary Ann Doane, "The Close-up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Fall 2003): 89-111. Malcom Turvey, "Balázs: Realist or Modernist?" *October* 115 (Winter 2006): 77-87.

¹⁴ Here, the most exemplary work is: Gertrud Koch, "Béla Balázs: The Physiognomy of Things." *New German Critique* 40, Special Issue on Weimar Film Theory (1987): 167-77; and Miriam Hansen, "Of Lightning Rods, Prisms, and Forgotten Scissors: *Potemkin* and German Film Theory." *New German Critique* 95, Special Issue for David Bathrick (Spring - Summer, 2005): 162-179.

tendency to mitigate or contain what I take to be an irreducible contradiction at the heart of his theoretical project. In the case of the historicist approach, this is accomplished by identifying all of the possible contemporaneous influences upon his thought and linking them to the various elements that make up the *mélange* of his writing. Such an approach to Balázs's film theory does not aim to reconstruct it as a unified system of thought but rather as the heterogeneous expression of a milieu. In the case of the debates-in-film-theory approach, the internal contradictions of Balázs's film theory are contained by aligning his name with a stable position represented by one set of theorists and against a position represented by another set of theorists (e.g. realists versus formalists). Any lack of coherence internal to Balázs's thought is compensated for by the external coherence of the disciplinary taxonomy into which it is slotted.

My aim is to preserve the internal incoherence of Balázs's theory in order to trace it back to a more fundamental paradox that arises from his definition of film as "the art of physiognomy." We can describe the logical structure of this paradox with a variety of oxymorons: mediated immediacy, historical essence, formed ideal. All of these ultimately name Balázs's desire for an image of recognition without negation. The appearance of the face in cinema is the very model of this paradox because it is always a divided unity of type and expression, or, in Balázs's significant use of the terms, "race" and "individual." Something of the nature of this paradox is suggested by the co-existence in Balázs of the two orientations in early film theory I describe above; we can

now designate them in general terms as i) the effort to discern in cinema the intelligibility of historical form, and ii) the desire to discern the capacity for unmediated expression. But my claim is not that the paradox simply *is* this coexistence. (Indeed, it is clear that the second orientation all but overwhelms the first in Balázs.) Rather, the paradox is that, in his very attempt to define cinema's singularity in its capacity for the unmediated expression of a universal human essence, Balázs runs up against the problem of historical form. This dynamic is already entailed in his very choice of physiognomy as his master term. This choice, I argue, is meant to respond to an essential ambiguity: Balázs uses the readymade metaphor of cinema as a "universal language" while simultaneously maintaining the basis for that universality in cinema's absolute distinction from language. And, as I hope to show, physiognomy is what Balázs turns to in his effort to resolve this problem. Physiognomy comes to stand for Balázs as the name for a cinematic language without negativity, that is, for the unmediated mediation of human essence—the fully "visible man" who never fails to recognize himself.

2.3 Cinema's Universal (Anti-) Language

In the triumphal spirit of what Miriam Hansen has called "motion picture millennialism,"¹⁵ Balázs concludes the title essay of *Visible Man* with the assertion that the new "universal language" of cinema has the power to redeem humankind "from the

¹⁵ Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991. p. 77.

course of Babel" (14).¹⁶ This metaphor of film as a "universal language" was a familiar device in discussions of film in the silent era. And it was not limited to the conceits of early film theorists and critics, but had a broad cultural currency in popular discourse and industrial self-promotion.¹⁷ What makes Balázs's use of the universal language metaphor peculiar in this context is that he grounds it in a resolute *dis-analogy*. His claim to universality presumes a hypostatized opposition between the mediums of language and film. For the key to Balázs's "millennialism" lies in cinema's capacity to recover a preverbal but generically human communicability that he can project into a utopian future beyond the overcoming of linguistic divisions. He cites Rousseau's speculative return to a state of nature as a similar kind of double movement, a return that "implied a step forward" (220). But unlike Rousseau, Balázs is entirely uninterested in the origin of language as a problem for thinking such a return. There is no equivalent in Balázs's thought to Rousseau's abyssal question in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755):

¹⁶ This trope was already a commonplace by the time Balázs wrote *Visible Man*. Perhaps the most famous instance is a remark Lillian Gish's autobiography reports D.W. Griffith making on the set of *Intolerance*: "We have gone beyond Babel, beyond words. We have found a new universal language, a power that can make men brothers and end war forever. Remember that! Remember that when you stand in front of a camera!" Lillian Gish, *The Movies, Mr. Griffith, and Me*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1969. p. 183. Quoted in Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, p. 173.

¹⁷ Among early proponents of this metaphor, three of the most prominent figures were Vachel Lindsay, Ricciotto Canudo and Louis Delluc. For a detailed account of how the "universal language" metaphor operated in a specifically American context see Miriam Hansen, "Universal Language and Democratic Culture: Myths of Origin in Early American Cinema," in *Myth and Enlightenment in American Literature: In Honor of Hans-Joachim Lang*. Dieter Meindl and Friedrich W. Horlacher, eds. Erlangen: University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, 1985: 321-51.

“which was the more necessary: an already formed society for the invention of languages, or an already invented language for the establishment of society?”¹⁸ Balázs skirts this *mise en abyme* altogether by positing the idea of two self-contained and distinct semiotic systems—one consisting of language and the other of expressive gesture—that stand in external relation to one another. He reasons that just as language alone can constitute a social totality, “[s]uch a complete and seamless system can also be found in the image of man and the world as an immediate expressive gesture. Human culture can be conceived in the absence of language” (12). It would be hard to imagine a position more heretical to the Aristotelian determination of the human as a speaking animal.

Balázs draws a sharp distinction between the facial expressions that accompany the audible words of actors on stage and the facial expressions of silent film actors. This distinction is based on the difference between what he calls “linguistic gesture” (*Sprachgebärde*) and the “language of gestures” (*Gebärdensprache*) (24). Balázs is careful to point out that the second is not a form of pantomime.¹⁹ In both cases, the actors form words with their mouths and yet in film this phenomenon exists on an “entirely different plane” (24) because the meaning it reveals is fundamentally non-linguistic. To

¹⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*. Trans. Donald A. Cress. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987. p. 51.

¹⁹ In one of his many local moments of critical genius, Balázs notes that “Pantomime is silent not just to the ear but also for the eye. Not a mute art, but the art of muteness: the dreamland of silence. Film, however, is merely soundless. Unlike music, which despite its sound comes from the world of silence, film does not reveal to us the soul of silence” (25).

invert Blanchot's famous maxim: for Balázs, seeing is not speaking, even, or especially, in the case of *seen speech*.²⁰ He writes:

And yet the film actor speaks, exactly as does the stage actor. There is no difference in his gestures. We just do not hear him; but we *see* him speak. That's where the great difference lies. ... In film, speaking becomes immediate, visual, facial expression. To *see* speech is to learn quite different things from just hearing the words. The speaking mouth often shows more than actual words can convey. ... Even when the words are in Chinese, we understand these linguistic gestures. But the moment we see a mouth shaping words, and become aware therefore of an acoustic dimension, then the performance loses its effect; for this is when we notice that we haven't heard the actor's words, and we come to see him as a deaf mute straining grotesquely to make himself understood. ... These two modes of plain speech seem to be irreconcilable. (25)

Balázs takes this opposition yet further by insisting upon an historical externality as well: although expressive gesture preceded verbal language historically — “its roots in human nature are older and deeper than the spoken language”(11)—the latter did *not* arise organically from the former according to a developmental principle. Verbal language was a purely accidental byproduct of facial expression. Originally, mouths simply gesticulated like hands. The incidental sounds they emitted were appropriated only as a secondary matter and exploited for different ends. Further, this mythical anthropology allows Balázs to make no fundamental distinction between speech and writing. Although he uses the invention of printing as an historical anchor for his argument, it does not mark for him a qualitative shift from oral to print culture. For

²⁰ “Speaking Is Not Seeing.” Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hansen. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 25.

Balázs, printing was simply a brute engine for the cultural domination of language *tout court*. Consequently, his argument moves indifferently between the registers of writing and speech. “In a culture dominated by words ... now that the soul has become audible, it has grown almost invisible. This is what the printing press has done” (10). In short, Balázs’s comparison of language and film makes language into a bloc against which to elucidate film’s power to capture the “polyphonous” properties of gesture and facial expression. Whereas Horkheimer and Adorno, for example, describe the characteristic dialectic of silent cinema as the tension between images and text, a dialectic that disappears with the arrival of sound when writing was “banished from film like a foreign substance,” for Balázs silent film itself cannot accommodate any such dialectic with language (whether spoken *or* written) without sacrificing its specificity.²¹ In his account of cinema’s native properties, language is a foreign substance from the beginning.

Balázs pursues his argument for cinematic specificity along both descriptive and normative lines. Descriptively, he distinguishes the immanent properties of cinema from those of all other artistic mediums, especially the linguistic mediums of literature and theater, but also from other forms of non-verbal performance such as dance and pantomime as well as the plastic arts of painting and sculpture. This claim for cinematic purity aligns Balázs with his younger contemporary in Berlin, Rudolf Arnheim, whose

²¹ Adorno *Gesammelte Schriften* 3 p. 333. qtd. Hansen 190.

1932 *Film als Kunst* announced itself as a “A New Laocoön,” and against those other classical film theorists such as Vachel Lindsay in the United States whose *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915, 1922) described film variously as “sculpture-in-motion,” “painting-in-motion,” and “architecture-in -motion,” and Riccioto Canudo in France who envisioned cinema as a “total art form” that would absorb all the other spatial and temporal arts.²² (The most profound antagonist on this question of medium specificity is undoubtedly Eisenstein, as we’ll see in the next chapter.)

At the same time, Balázs’s determination of cinematic specificity has a strong normative aim. Much of Balázs’s introduction to *Visible Man* is devoted to arguing that filmmakers, like all artists, need a theory to guide their work. Balázs makes clear that the object for his “*philosophy of the art of film*” (3) is not the majority of films as they were currently made (although he does present a number of actually existing exemplars) but rather film in its ideal form. As with most arguments for purity, his theory is also preoccupied with the problem of contamination. He condemns, for example, the all too common temptation of filmmakers to import the properly literary device of allegory, as when Father Time with a scythe is introduced at a deathbed or a broken lily is used “to tell us that a girl has lost her virginity” (57). Language for Balázs is more than the material presence of text on screen or, later, of the voice in the synchronized audio

²² Arnheim, *Film as Art*. Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture*. 2nd Ed. New York: Liveright, 1970; Canudo Dullac in Abel 58-66.

track.²³ Language is also an *idea* of language. For it is as an idea or, more precisely, as a device—as allegory, as narrative, as symbol, or as hieroglyph—that language can contaminate the production of a film at its core. “The artistic nature of film resides in the power and subtlety of its images and its gestural language. *This explains why film has nothing in common with literature*” (19). His mode here is nakedly evaluative: e.g. “it is superfluous, false and kitschy to translate literary allegories conceived in the world of concepts into cinematic images” (57). At these moments, *Visible Man’s* provenance in Balázs’s film criticism is at its most conspicuous.²⁴ Equally conspicuous is his outmoded conception of literature. We get little sense from this book, written during the 1920s in one of the great cultural capitals of Europe, that such a thing as modern literature exists. Consequently, Balázs does not consider the possibility that the contamination might actually be moving in the other direction, with cinema directly influencing modernist literature.²⁵

²³ In fact, Balázs is rather nuanced on the question of inter-titles—the primary source of on-screen text in the silent era. His position is that they are justified only to augment the film’s meaning but not as a substitute for or bridge across an absence in the images themselves. “[W]oe to the film if the poetry missing from the images is to be supplied by the titles” (74). On the other hand, he displays a certain anti-modernist sensibility by distancing himself from those “[d]octrinaire aesthetes [who] call for the elimination of titles in the name of pure visuality” (74).

²⁴ From 1922 to 1925, Balázs wrote over two hundred pieces of film criticism for the Viennese daily *Der Tag*. Joseph Zsuffa, *Béla Balázs: The Man and The Artist*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987. p. 110.

²⁵ One thinks here of Gertrud Stein’s remarks in 1935 about the unwitting influence of cinema on her writing of *Making of Americans* (between 1903 and 1911): “I was doing what cinema was doing

2.4 Balázs's Romantic Physiognomy

As recent art historical scholarship has demonstrated physiognomic analysis re-emerged in the Weimar period as a dominant hermeneutics, not just of faces, but of art and cultural production more broadly.²⁶ In his study of German art theory, Frederic J. Schwartz provides a concise definition of this distinctly modern notion of physiognomy as “perception that grasps the elements of the world, be they faces or landscapes, cultures or works of art, as wholes, spontaneously and in an instant.”²⁷ In *Visible Man*, Balázs speaks in just these terms about the physiognomic perception enabled by film. As the other of verbal language, Balázs takes the promise of physiognomy to be the fulfillment of his dream of immediate recognition.

The first problem that confronts a reader trying to establish the conceptual consistency of Balázs's idea of physiognomy is that the functional scope of this term

... I of course did not think of it in terms of the cinema, in fact I doubt whether at that time I had ever seen a cinema but, and I cannot repeat this too often any one is of one's period and this our period was undoubtedly the period of cinema.” Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (London: Virago, 1985), 176–7. For a discussion of the dynamic between cinema and modern literature in a specifically German context see: Anton Kaes, “The Debate about Cinema: Charting a Controversy (1909-1929)” Trans. David J. Levin. *New German Critique*, No. 40, Special Issue on Weimar Film Theory (Winter, 1987): 7-33.

²⁶ See, for example: Claudia Schmölders and Sander Gilman, eds., *Gesichter der Weimarer Republik: Eine physisinomische Kulturgeschichte* (Cologne: DuMont, 200), 7-11; Frederic J Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-century Germany* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press], 2005), 137–242.

²⁷ Schwartz, *Blind Spots*, 177.

expands and contracts as we move through the “aesthetic-critical patchwork”²⁸ that is *Visible Man*. In Balázs’s unsystematic theoretical idiom, physiognomy is eminently fungible. It names variously: the universally recognizable “language of gestures and facial expressions” (14); a property of the close-up as the “technical precondition for the art of facial expression and hence of the higher art of film in general” (37); a dramaturgical principle guiding all the elements of the cinematic *mise-en-scene* from set design to casting of actors to wardrobe (“every crease in his [the film actor’s] clothes takes on the same expressive significance as a wrinkle in his face” (29)); a transcendental category of human perception, like time and space (56); the immanent expressivity or “pansymbolism” of “things” from landscapes to factories to crowds (“Every child knows that things have a face...” (46)); a cinematographic principle (“Physiognomy depends on point of view, in other words, on the camera set-up” (112)).

The difficulty of tracking Balázs’s capacious use of the concept is only compounded when we turn to consider the intractable issue of physiognomy’s profoundly ideological history. As Jacques Aumont puts it in his study of the face in cinema: “The history of the word, that of the beliefs that it describes, should have caused him to be wary if he had been careful.”²⁹ To be sure, his choice of the word physiognomy

²⁸ Aumont, 129.

²⁹ Aumont, 132.

cannot be seen as ideologically neutral. This was not an innocent term at the time Balázs was writing, if it ever was. And even if we were to ascribe a certain blinkered, Eurocentric naïveté to this choice in the 1920's, no such alibi would hold for his decision to retain the centrality of the term in *The Theory of Film*, first published in 1942, well after the implications of the Nazi appropriation of physiognomy as a racist pseudo-science had unequivocally announced themselves.³⁰ It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Balázs's lack of theoretical precision in his conceptual use of physiognomy has its ideological counterpart in the vagueness of his political thought. This was undoubtedly the judgment of many of his most perceptive contemporaries, most especially those critics with whom Balázs considered himself to be in political solidarity—Georg Lukács, Siegfried Kracauer, Sergei Eisenstein, and Bertolt Brecht.

Kracauer, it's worth noting, also participated in the general tendency of the period to invoke physiognomy as a term for cultural analysis in his readings of surface-level social phenomena in his Weimar writings.³¹ His usage was worlds away, however, from Balázs's vitalist conception of physiognomy as the antidote to capitalist reification. In a review of *Visible Man*, Kracauer effectively marks this difference while also pointing to the critical poverty, in his view, of Balázs's insistence on the non-linguistic expressive

³⁰ Not to mention Balázs's awareness of the celebration by Third Reich film ideologues such as Wolfgang Liebeneiner of certain vitalist strains in his theory. See Erica Carter, *Dietrich's Ghosts: The Sublime and the Beautiful in Third Reich Film*. London: British Film Institute, 2004. p. 96-7.

³¹ Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995).

power of cinema. "The making visible of man through film is the opposite of the movement toward real concreteness in that it only confirms, and holds on to, the bad rationality of capitalist thinking. Only through the insights that come with language can radical change take place."³²

I do not disagree with this negative judgment on the part of some of Balázs's more philosophically serious contemporaries, and I have no interest here in "recuperating" the political dimension of his film theory for its own sake. As concerns his use of physiognomy, the difference I would mark between previous critical approaches to Balázs (which I've noted above) and my own is that I take up Balázs's physiognomic theory of cinema from the perspective of a dynamic internal to the history of physiognomy itself. Namely, how the aesthetic and epistemological problem of form (*Gestalt*) and its representation shifts from a neo-classical to a Romantic modern framework.

Very schematically, we can describe that shift in the following terms. In its neo-classical determination, most prominently as it was given by the influential work of Giovanni Battista della Porta at the end of the sixteenth century, physiognomy

³² Siegfried Kracauer, "Bücher vom Film" *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 30 Sept. 1927. Qtd. in Sabine Hake, *The Cinema's Third Machine: Writing on Film in Germany, 1907-1933* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 227.

interpreted the elements of the human face as the visible signs of invisible forces.³³ In line with Foucault's account of the Renaissance episteme, this hermeneutic procedure was governed by relations of similitude. It read the surface of things for "visible marks for the invisible analogies" linking individual human fates to a cosmic order.³⁴ The modern definition of physiognomy was produced most prominently by the Swiss Pastor Johann Caspar Lavater in his multi-volume treatise *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775-1778). Lavater's system retains from the Neoclassical understanding of physiognomy the presumption of a static and univocal relation between an invisible realm and a visible order. But at the same time Lavater also aspired to modernize physiognomy and place it on an Enlightenment footing by reading facial features not as the visible analogies of cosmic forces but rather as a natural semiotics (or "divine alphabet") of the individual soul.³⁵ The question of technique for Lavater became about distinguishing the natural signs of immutable (God-given) character from the arbitrary signs of culture and other accidents of time. Two interrelated developments follow from the Romanticist inflection of Lavater's physiognomy. First, as the absolute distinction between natural and

³³ Patrizia Magli, "The Face and the Soul" in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part Two*. Eds. Michel Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi. New York: Zone, 1989.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Random House, 1970. p. 26.

³⁵ Christoph Siegrist, "Letters of the Divine Alphabet' – Lavater's Concept of Physiognomy" in *The Faces of Physiognomy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Johann Caspar Lavater*. Ed. Ellis Shookman. Columbia: Camden House, 1993.

arbitrary signs erodes over the course of the 18th century under the pressure of Romanticism's challenge to a classically mimetic idea of art, physiognomy begins to be construed far more broadly as a technique for reading the signs of culture. Second, rather than reading the surface of things for signs of an invisible order, the surface itself begins to be seen as directly presenting its own principle in the form of a self-sustaining organic unity. One of the most powerful examples of this transformation can be found in Goethe's conception of "morphology," which, in his conscious distancing from Lavater, was meant to be a direct refutation of physiognomy as a static semiotics. In a moment, we will consider in detail how this fundamental tension between Lavater and Goethe is evidenced in Balázs's conception of physiognomy.

But first, it is useful to consider how the mutation of physiognomy we've just described as a passage from Neo-classical to Romanticism appears in the framework provided by Jacques Rancière's notion of regimes of art. This effort at re-translation is worthwhile for our effort to understand Balázs's appropriation of physiognomy as a cinematic concept not least because Rancière himself traces the idea of cinema as an art to German Romanticism. In Rancière's schema, the formal principles of Lavater's conception of physiognomy would fall under the "representational regime" of art, insofar as it depends upon a fixed, hierarchical relation between an intelligible order and a sensible form. After physiognomy is taken up by Romantic thought and becomes a principle of organicism in both art and nature, it assumes the qualities of the "aesthetic

regime" of art, insofar as it involves a collapse of division between the sensible and the intelligible. The logic of the "aesthetic regime," as Rancière describes it, is a kind of undoing of the representative regime: "It confronts the old principle of form fashioning matter with the identity, at the core of this new regime, between the pure power of the idea and the radical impotence of sensible presence and of the mute writing of things."³⁶ This is the very idea of art, Rancière argues, that cinema inherited from the Romantics. For especially enthusiastic early film theorists like Jean Epstein cinema appeared as the perfect embodiment of that idea. "Cinema," Rancière writes, "in the double power of the conscious eye of the director and the unconscious eye of the camera, is the perfect embodiment of Schelling's and Hegel's argument that the identity of conscious and unconscious is the very principle of art."³⁷ The point of Rancière's argument, however, is that this "fable" about cinema as the incarnation of the aesthetic regime of art was thwarted at the very moment of its articulation by the return, at the very heart of cinema, of the logic of the representative regime.

Although Rancière does not address Balázs's writing in this context, he might well have. Much like Epstein, Rancière's signature example of an early film theorist embraced cinema as the fulfillment of the Romanticist idea of art, Balázs also seeks to liberate cinema from the Aristotelian domination of *muthos* (plot) over *opsis* (sensible

³⁶ Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, p.8.

³⁷ Ibid, 9.

spectacle). Balázs takes this to the ultimate end of purifying cinematic specificity not only of literature but of the linguistic as such. His vision of a “physiognomy of things” revealed in cinema seems the perfect fulfillment of Novalis’s dictum — “Everything speaks” — that Rancière takes as a two-word definition of the aesthetic age.³⁸ In Balázs’s purified idea of silent film, things “speak” only by virtue of a universal muteness.

In the speaking world, silent objects are much more lifeless and insignificant than human beings. ... In the theatre there is a difference of degree between human individuals, who speak, and things, which are silent. The two live in different dimensions. In film, however, this difference of degree vanishes; objects are not degraded or diminished in this way, but *share with human beings a quality of silence* that makes the two almost homogeneous, and hence enhances the mute object’s vitality and significance. Since it does not speak less than human beings, it says just as much. (23)

It is in passages such as this that Balázs comes closest in *Visible Man* to the French *photogénie* enthusiasts like Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein who saw in cinematic perception a virtually unlimited animistic capacity to express/reveal the inner spirit of inanimate matter. For these theorists, I would argue, the idea that the close-up makes everything into a face, the consequence of this “facialization” (Deleuze) for their theory was in fact a kind of displacement of the privileged status of the human face itself in film.

There is, however, a strong tendency in *Visible Man* that moves in the contrary direction by placing the humanity of the face at the center of this animistic phenomenon.

³⁸ Ibid, 178.

For this tendency—which I claim ultimately dominates—this absence of verbal language means that nothing speaks louder than the human face. Consider, for example, the following passage from a section entitled “Aura” in which Balázs describes the effect of tightening the frame of a generic medium shot which “shows only the characters’ immediate surroundings”:

[B]y drawing the image frame in more tightly it enables a character to illuminate himself, as it were, with the emanation of his own soul. His milieu becomes a visible ‘aura’, his physiognomy expands beyond the contours of his own body. The human play of gestures and expressions continues to prevail over that of objects and his facial expressions become an interpretation of the expression of objects. For, in the final analysis, it is only human beings that matter. And the ‘expressions’ of objects become significant only in so far as they relate to human expression. (51)

As the camera moves in, it is as though the aura of the human face radiates outward to infuse the objects that surround it with what may appear to be their own inner light but in truth is merely a reflection.³⁹

In the following section, we will trace the tension between the two passages above in Balázs’s thought—between a physiognomy of things and one that preserves pride of place for the human face—to a fundamental ambiguity in his appropriation of Goethe and Lavater’s respective conceptions of physiognomy and form.

³⁹ The comparison that leaps to mind here is Walter Benjamin’s discussion in the Artwork essay of the commodified face of the film star as the last bastion for a decaying aura.

2.5 Goethe on Film?

Despite the ubiquity of physiognomy as a term in *Visible Man*, Balázs makes only two brief references to a treatise on the subject. Significantly, the authority he chooses to invoke in both cases is not a classical figure like Pythagoras or the pseudo-Aristotle of *De physiognomia*, nor the Neoplatonist Giovanni Battista della Porta, nor finally, and most conspicuously, does Balázs choose to stake his claim with the undisputed founder of modern physiognomy, the Swiss pastor Johann Casper Lavater.⁴⁰ Eschewing these genuine physiognomic authorities, Balázs cites Goethe. What is the significance of Balázs's decision to refer to Goethe's relatively peripheral contributions to Johann Caspar Lavater's massive *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775-1778) rather than simply citing Lavater himself? From the perspective of the intellectual milieu in which Balázs wrote *Visible Man*, this elision of Lavater in favor of Goethe was anything but unusual. Indeed, that very elision was a hallmark of the early 20th-century revival of physiognomic thought in Germany.⁴¹ Lavater's theories had long been considered scientifically discredited as a result, most prominently, of the attacks by one of his contemporaries, the Göttingen physicist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg. As Richard Gray

⁴⁰ In fact, Lavater's name goes entirely unmentioned in Balázs's three books on film, except as part of the title of the work Balázs cites as Goethe's *Contributions to Lavater's Physiognomical Fragments*.

⁴¹ Richard T. Gray, *About Face: German Physiognomic Thought from Lavater to Auschwitz*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004.

has shown, for Weimar era proponents of physiognomic thought such as Ludwig Klages, Oswald Spengler and Rudolf Kassner, the name Lavater was “a kind of specter that must be banished at all costs in order to insure the credibility of their own physiognomic theories.”⁴² To fill the empty place of a founding father, these theorists all claimed the unassailable authority of Goethe as their intellectual progenitor. To underscore the retrospective nature of this common and largely fanciful claim of paternity, Gray gives Goethe the punning honorific “found(l)ing father” of modern German physiognomics. Nevertheless, the significance of Balázs’s reference to Goethe exceeds this general tendency among early 20th-century German proponents of physiognomy to suppress its discredited founder.⁴³

One significant way in which Balázs’s project stood out in the context of physiognomy’s resurgence as (pseudo)-scientific method in Germany is that he insists upon its *cinematic* and not just photographic nature. The visual technology *par excellence* for the late 19th and early 20th century revival of physiognomics was photography, much as silhouettes were in the 18th century for Lavater. Cinema, by comparison, was almost completely ignored as an instrument for physiognomic study. When the cinematic

⁴² Gray, 139.

⁴³ Erica Carter also finds great significance in Balázs’s choice to reference Goethe rather than Lavater but draws from it somewhat different implications than I do. She links Goethe’s morphology with Balázs’s attention to the flux of history and the contingency of human perception. See *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory*, Intro. p. xxviii.

camera was used for such studies, as in the case of the expressive psychologist Philip Lersch's *Gesicht und Seele* (Face and Psyche) (1932), it was not as a means for reproducing continuous motion but rather to decompose the filmstrip into exemplary static shots. In Deleuze's terms, the point was to extract "privileged instants" from the production of equidistant shots ("any-instant-whatsoever") that constitutes cinema's distinction from the visual technologies that preceded it. In effect, Lersch turned cinema back into photography. *Visible Man* was unique as "the only treatise of note that deals with the relationship of cinematic portrayal to questions of human physiognomy."⁴⁴ Balázs defined film as "the art of physiognomy" at the very moment when the renaissance of (pseudo) scientific physiognomic practice had no use for film.

In view of this anomaly, Balázs's anachronistic formulation "Goethe on Film" assumes a new force. At the same time that his choice of Goethe over Lavater aligns with the general ideological recuperation of physiognomy in the period, the way in which he in turn puts Goethe in relation to film works against the grain of that recuperation. In order to see how this works, it is worth lingering on a crucial aspect of the tension between Lavater's conception of physiognomy and what Goethe came to call "morphology." Namely, the fundamental distinction between the representational

⁴⁴ Gray, 360.

strategies entailed by Lavater's focus on natural form [*Gestalt*] as static structure versus Goethe's understanding of form as fundamentally dynamic.

Balázs quotes twice from an addendum Goethe wrote for the fragment "Von der Physiognomik überhaupt" ("On physiognomics in general") in volume one of Lavater's *Physiognomical Fragments*. The first quotation stands as an epigraph for the major section of *Visible Man* entitled "Type and Physiognomy." It is a statement Goethe attributes to Aristotle concerning the univocal correlation between the bodily structures of animals and their essential natures or "habits." "For no animal has ever existed that had the shape of one creature and the habit of another, but each creature has its own body and its own meaning" (27). The second of Balázs's references to Goethe appears just a few pages later in a subsection with the splendidly anachronistic title "Goethe on Film." Here Balázs quotes a longer passage by Goethe concerning the complex relation between, on the one hand, the "inner energies and their actions" shown by a person's "naked form" [*nackte Gestalt*] or "unconscious gestures" [*unbedachte Gebärden*] and, on the other, the problem of penetrating the "veils" of "class, habit, possessions and clothing" that are thought to obscure that "innermost nature" (29). Goethe resolves this apparent obstacle to physiognomic discernment by positing a dialectic between these two orders of human appearance, in effect making the trappings of culture into a second nature shaped by and in turn shaping nature proper.

Initially, the most curious thing about Balázs's use of Goethe's writing on physiognomy is how little he seems to do with it. The sections in which Goethe appears are devoted to narrowly dramaturgical matters. And so Balázs follows the epigraph by Goethe's Aristotle on the correlation between animal form and nature with a discussion of the importance of selecting film actors whose appearances match the characters they play. After quoting Goethe's passage on the dialectic of natural and cultural forms, Balázs remarks that "[n]othing needs adding to this" and then adds that while facial expression is variable, the "physiognomy of clothing and the immediate environment is not so flexible." Therefore, he counsels, filmmakers should take care to select costumes and sets that do not conflict with the "living movement of gestures" (29). This afterthought effectively returns Goethe's subtle dialectic back to the static opposition it was designed to transform. After this, it's hard not to read "Goethe on Film" as a disappointingly literal title for this section, as though Balázs were simply culling chestnuts from the canon of German Romanticism in order to assemble a handbook on filmmaking.

2.6 Lavater and Physiognomy as Nature Morte

*Dear friend, if I am still exactly the same as I was nine years ago,
why are you no longer so?*

—Letter from Lavater to Goethe, 28 July 1782⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Qtd. in Christoph Siegrist, "Letters of the Divine Alphabet' – Lavater's Concept of Physiognomy" in *The Faces of Physiognomy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Johann Caspar Lavater*. Ed. Ellis Shookman. Columbia: Camden House, 1993. p. 38.

Lavater aimed his physiognomic gaze at the “firm” and unchanging parts of the body, especially the contours of the skull in order to divide “the solid in the character from the habitual, the habitual from the accidental.”⁴⁶ This fixation on the natural signs of immutable character brought Lavater to define physiognomy against pathognomy, which concerned the physiological expression of emotion in gesture, facial movement and voice.⁴⁷ Consequently, his choice of representational means for producing physiognomic studies privileged the kind of frozen blankness exemplified in the silhouette:

The silhouette of a human being or of a human face is the faintest and emptiest but—if the light has been cast on a clean surface and was sufficiently parallel to it—also the truest and most faithful image of a human being that one can give. The weakest because it is almost nothing positive; it is only negative, only a half-faced borderline. The most faithful because it is an unmediated expression of nature, like none that anyone—not even the most talented draftsman—can draw from nature.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Physiognomische Fragmente*. Vol. 1, p. 160. Quoted in Moore, 171-2.

⁴⁷ See Ellis Shookman, “Pseudo-Science, Social Fad, Literary Wonder: Johann Caspar Lavater and the Art of Physiognomy” in *The Faces of Physiognomy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Johann Caspar Lavater*. Ed. Ellis Shookman. Columbia: Camden House, 1993.

⁴⁸ *Physiognomische Fragmente*. Vol.1, p. 90. Quoted in Siegrist.



Figure 1: Machine for drawing silhouettes. From the 1792 English edition of Johann Kasper Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*.

Because it was traced from a shadow cast directly onto the surface of inscription, a silhouette was not subject to the distorting mediation of an artist's free hand. And by distilling the face to a single line, the product of this process screened out transitory expression and with it the possibility of the arbitrary signs of transitory expression and intentional dissimulation. By virtue of this double subtraction, in the process and in the result, the silhouette was ideally suited to fulfill Lavater's objective of "unmediated expression." Aesthetically, we could say that the representational demands of Lavater's physiognomy aspire to a certain idea of the still life, *nature morte*, taken to abstract perfection.

Indeed, this aspiration bespeaks a more than metaphorical relation between the aesthetic mandate of Lavater's physiognomy and the notion of a death drive.⁴⁹ For Lavater, actual death is the ultimate guarantor of physiognomic transparency: "What life makes fugitive, death arrests; what was indefinable is defined."⁵⁰ This is not just a speculative claim on Lavater's part. He offers empirical evidence from his own informal study, conducted, one assumes, in the course of his regular duties as a pastor:

I have seen so many dead people, that I have been able to make the unique observation, that about 16, 18, 24 hours after their death (depending on what kind of illness they have had) [they have] a better outline [expression] than they have ever had while still alive – which is much more determined, proportional, homogenous, nobler, and sublime ... Couldn't this be a real basis for the physiognomy? Through the ebb and flow of chance and passion this [basic physiognomy] fades after a while; is it restored again a while after death like muddy water which becomes clear when it has been allowed to stand still?⁵¹

In this remarkable passage, living itself is presented as a process that disfigures and disguises the most virtuous aspects of a person's physiognomy. We can say, therefore, that Lavater's physiognomy entails a death drive not only in Freud's sense of a principle by which organic life seeks to return to the state of inanimate matter, but, more fittingly for our purposes, in the sense that Freud's philosophical antecedent Arthur

⁴⁹ One is reminded here of what Kracauer, for whom photography was the essence of cinema, wrote in his Marseilles manuscripts: "The face counts for nothing in film unless it includes the *death's-head* beneath." Qtd. in Miriam Hansen, "Introduction" to *Theory of Film*.

⁵⁰ Qtd. Shortland, 301.

⁵¹ Lavater, *Physiognomische Fragmente*. vol. 2, p. 4. Quoted in Moore, 176.



Figure 2: Skull and Mask from Lavater's *Physiognomische Fragmente*

Schopenhauer gave to the death drive as a natural source for the negation of the immoral life force of "Will," a negation which his aesthetics held could also be accomplished through the contemplation of art (albeit on a more provisional basis).

So it is not surprising that Schopenhauer should write an admiring essay on physiognomy in which he seconds Lavater's exclusion of pathognomy for its attention to the arbitrary and unreliable signs of expression.⁵² In that essay Schopenhauer links such signs directly to verbal language by playfully correcting Socrates' famous demand of Charmides to "speak, so I may see you." As pertains to the content of speech, Schopenhauer notes that it would be more correct for Socrates to say, "Do *not* speak so

⁵² "The science of physiognomy is one of the principal means of a knowledge of mankind: arts of dissimulation do not come within the range of physiognomy, but within that of mere pathognomy and mimicry." Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Physiognomy" in *The Essays of Schopenhauer*. p. 215.

that I can see you.” Lest we miss the ethical implications of this standpoint, he clarifies the pessimistic wisdom underlying Lavater’s self-conception as a “man loving physiognomist.”⁵³ “The face expresses a thought of nature itself,” Schopenhauer writes, “so that everyone is worth attentive observation, even though everyone may not be worth talking to.”

This convergence between Lavater’s humanist physiognomy and Schopenhauer’s philosophical pessimism sheds a different light upon Balázs’s dream of immediacy in his conception of cinema as a physiognomic art. For when Balázs announces that in film “the body becomes unmediated spirit, spirit rendered visible, wordless” (9), he comes strikingly close to Lavater’s vision of an ideal language used by resurrected souls in the afterlife: “expression that is instantaneous, truthful, comprehensive, unfathomable, impossible to attain in words, and inimitable. Such a human being is entirely natural language.”⁵⁴

2.7 Transcendental Physiognomy: Balázs’s Laocoönism

In the history of Western aesthetics, modern claims for medium specificity in the arts have their provenance in G. E. Lessing’s 1766 treatise *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits*

⁵³ It’s worth noting the full title of Lavater’s magnum opus: *Physiognomische Fragmente, zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniß und Menschliebe* (Physiognomic fragments for the promotion of human understanding and human love; 1775-1787).

⁵⁴ Qtd. in Siegrist, “Letters of the Divine Alphabet,” 27.

of *Painting and Poetry* (1766).⁵⁵ Although Balázs makes no direct reference to Lessing in *Visible Man* or in *The Spirit of Film*⁵⁶, his debt in these works to this foundational text of German romantic aesthetics is evident.⁵⁷ Balázs's rhetoric of differentiation closely resembles the semiotic argument Lessing invents in his *Laocoön*. When Balázs asserts that the "man of visual culture is not like a deaf mute who replaces words with sign language" (9), he recalls (consciously or not) Lessing's attack on the classical tradition of *ut pictoria poesis*, exemplified for Lessing by the saying "that painting is a mute poetry and poetry a speaking painting."⁵⁸ And as is true of Balázs's valoration of cinema in *Visible Man*, the aim of Lessing's aesthetics is not an ecumenical taxonomy of the arts.

⁵⁵ See W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. p. 95-115. On the question of medium specificity in film theory see: Brian Price, "The Latest Laocoon: Medium Specificity and the History of Film Theory," in *Handbook of Film and Media Studies*, ed., Robert Phillip Kolker. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

⁵⁶ Balázs does, however, make several references to Lessing and the *Laocoön* in *The Theory of Film* (1942), most prominently in a subsection titled "Lessing and the Film" in which he credits Lessing with having "outlined the difference between the film script and the film a century and a half before their time." 251-2.

⁵⁷ This connection was plainly evident to Rudolph Arnheim in his review of *The Spirit of Film* for the German weekly *Die Weltbühne*: "As far as he [Balázs] is concerned, it was indeed not for nothing that Lessing analyzed the Laokoon group. We sense on every page that the author had a genuine instinct for art before he undertook to explore the limits and possibilities of the new pictorial art." Rudolph Arnheim, "Der Geist des Films," *Die Weltbühne*, Jg. 26, H. 46 (Nov. 11th, 1930: 723-4. Translated in *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory*, p. 233.

⁵⁸ This statement is attributed to the Greek poet Simonides of Ceos (556-467 B.C.) whom Lessing calls "the Greek Voltaire." Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*. Trans. Edward Allen McCormick. Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1962. p. 4.

Lessing's argument effectively privileges poetry over painting; the fact that Balázs inverts this evaluative hierarchy (elevating the visual over the verbal) does not alter its logic of differentiation. The way that Balázs *does* depart from Lessing, however, is by pursuing what we might call an overly literal fidelity to its transcendental determination of medium specificity. As I'll argue below, Balázs's literalist appropriation of Lessing's method—his *Laocoönism*, so to speak—produces the necessity for him to posit physiognomy as its own transcendental category.

In order to see how this necessity arises from the way Balázs grounds the purity of cinema in the logic of Lessing's *Laocoön*, we must first briefly sketch Lessing's basic operation of thought in that seminal essay. Its occasion was a polemic against the neoclassicism of his German contemporary, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, over the comparison between Virgil's representation in the *Aeneid* of sea serpents killing Laocoön and his sons and the representation of the same event in the Laocoön group sculpture. Lessing himself provides the following deduction of his argument.⁵⁹ As a first principle, Lessing asserts a simple semiotic distinction between painting and poetry: whereas painting uses figures and colors in space, poetry employs articulate sounds in time.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ This syllogistic account appears half way through *Laocoön*, at the beginning of chapter 16, where he abruptly interrupts his detailed discussions of particular historical figures and works to say: "But I shall attempt now to derive the matter from first principles." *Ibid.* 78.

⁶⁰ Lessing construes painting and poetry broadly so as to include all the plastic arts (including sculpture) in the former and all the literary arts in the latter.

Thus, he partitions the signs native to each medium according to the transcendental categories of space and time. Lessing then inserts, in the guise of an additional first principle, an evaluative criterion for establishing the categories of object proper to each medium: “these signs must indisputably bear a suitable relation to the thing signified.”⁶¹ It therefore follows from his initial semiotic distinction that, because painting is a medium whose signs are spatially related, the proper objects for its representation are “bodies,” entities whose parts coexist in space. By the same token, the proper objects for poetry, construed as a medium whose signs are temporally related, are “actions,” entities whose parts succeed one another in time.

At this point, Lessing’s deduction takes a surprising turn: having strictly differentiated the semiotic systems of painting and poetry, he proceeds to erode the purity of that distinction. Bodies exist in time as well as space, he notes, and because paintings persist and can be contemplated over time they are capable of implying actions by depicting a frozen moment in an imagined trajectory of action (the famous “pregnant moment”). Conversely, actions require embodiment as well as duration and therefore poetry must partake in the depiction of bodies in order to represent action as a relation between spatially distributed entities. In other words, painting and poetry must

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 78.

each, by its own means, approximate the essential aspect of its opposite number.⁶² In the remarkably condensed course of this “dry chain of reasoning” (as he calls it), Lessing both demonstrates the transcendental differentiation of visual and verbal mediums and establishes this differentiation as the necessary condition for their internal relation at the level of form.

To return to Balázs, we can see that his argument for cinematic purity in *Visible Man* follows the first movement of Lessing’s deduction but strenuously resists the second. He often adopts the terms of Lessing’s deduction by basing the difference between cinema and language on the adequation of each medium’s semiotic system to the transcendental nature of its object. For example, in a section of *Visible Man* called “The Play of Facial Expressions” (*Mienenspiel*), Balázs argues that the time-bound seriality of words makes them inadequate to representing the simultaneity of polyphonous facial expressions; whereas film, as a medium with the capacity for both duration and spatial representation, is ideally suited to this object. But unlike Lessing, this distinction is not an overture to demonstrating relationality at another level. Balázs intends for the distinction between film and language to stand without dialectical modification, even though, as we’ve just seen, already in the *Laocoön* that distinction is not designed to

⁶² Lessing further deduces the aesthetic “rules” by which painting and poetry can best carry out this imperative. For painting, this is the famous “pregnant moment” which depicts an action at its central point in order to best enable the viewer to imagine the moments preceding and following it. For poetry this means choosing to describe the single property of bodies that “awakens the most vivid image.” *Ibid.*, 79.

stand in this way. The boundary Lessing posits between mediums is intrinsically unstable.⁶³ Add to this the fact that film is *equally* a temporal medium like music or poetry *and* a spatial medium like painting and sculpture, and that a strict application of Lessing's categories would therefore require internally splitting the semiotic unity of film itself, and Balázs's method here seems destined to founder. Thus, in order to maintain an hypostatized distinction between film and language, Balázs is compelled to posit a new transcendental category — physiognomy — coincident with the immanent capacities of cinema:

Just as time and space are categories of our understanding, and can thus never be eliminated from the world of our experience, so too the physiognomical attaches to every phenomenon. It is a necessary category of our perception. (56)

This audacious addition to Kant's transcendental categories enables Balázs to designate film "the art of physiognomy" in two senses simultaneously: with respect to film's special affinity with certain naturally expressive objects (the human face above all) *and* to an expressive quality that the technical properties of film (especially the close-up) bring to all objects. What binds these two aspects together, and what obviates the need for Balázs to decide between them, is the a priori adequation of a perceptual category to a medium. For this reason, Balázs can claim film is a physiognomic art *quid juris*, in the same way that Lessing can claim that painting is a spatial art or poetry a temporal art.

⁶³ Mitchell makes a similar argument against attempts to read Lessing as a system builder. See *Iconology*, pgs. 95-115.

Though idiosyncratic in its formulation, Balázs's transcendental elevation of physiognomy can be seen to fall into the same confusion between perception and expression as a number of Weimar art historians—most notably Hans Sedlmayr—who took up physiognomy as a hermeneutic.⁶⁴ And it is certainly possible to dismiss Balázs's idea here as the undisciplined but evocative gesture of someone who, as his one-time friend Lukács maintained, was a writer rather than a philosopher. But it is also worth asking precisely what form this confusion is thought to take here and whether in fact there is not a logic or even a philosophical consistency to it that underlies a far more general tendency to make the image of the face into the very emblem of recognition.

What would it mean to make physiognomy into a transcendental category like time and space? In strictly Kantian terms, this is already a category error: time and space are purely formal categories, whereas physiognomy has a definite content both as an historical discourse and in the concrete image of the face. On the one hand, Balázs wants to make physiognomy into an a priori form without empirical content. Physiognomy would then be a condition of possibility for every experience but something that, in itself, can never be the direct object of experience. On the other, Balázs wants physiognomy to signify the specific content of a human essence as figured by the

⁶⁴ In Sedlmayr's case this took the form of a rather pernicious confusion of physiognomy with gestalt psychology, a confusion Balázs is also prone to at times in *Visible Man*. See: Schwartz, *Blind Spots*, 156–163.

organic unity of the human face. This amounts to a direct presentation of the transcendental in the empirical. What one sees upon gazing at the close-up of a face in cinema is the condition of possibility for perception as such. Jean-Luc Nancy explores a similar idea in Heidegger's discussion of death mask photographs (not an incidental example for us) in his *Kantbuch*. Gazing at these photographs, Heidegger imagines something quite analogous to Balázs's idea of physiognomic vision, which Nancy describes as the "*self-imagining of the schematism*," or, more simply as "*seeing seeing*."⁶⁵ In the following section, we will trace some implications of this surprising moment of proximity between Balázs and Heidegger via a contemporary thinker deeply indebted to Heidegger—Giorgio Agamben—in order to consider how a thoroughgoing anti-humanism shadows Balázs's humanist commitment to the face as its reverse image.

2.8 Balázs and Agamben

[T]he language of gesture is the true mother tongue of mankind.
—Balázs, *Visible Man* (11)

Cinema leads images back to the homeland of gesture.
—Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture"⁶⁶

When Giorgio Agamben argues in "Notes on Gesture" (1992) that the Western bourgeoisie lost control of its gestures by the end of the nineteenth century and then

⁶⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, "Masked Imagination" in *The Ground of the Image*. Trans. Jeff Fort. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

⁶⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*. Trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000. p. 56.

turned to cinema in the twentieth as a means for reclaiming that loss, he seems to have appropriated the central idea Balázs articulated in *Visible Man* some seventy years earlier. The essential premise that brings the two thinkers into this surprising proximity is that the historical appearance of cinema must be thought in relation to a longer history of human gesture, a history apprehended at the moment of cinema's arrival through the experience of its very loss. Agamben's thesis is that "[i]n the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss."⁶⁷ In the last clause of Agamben's thesis—in the coincidence of cinema's reclaiming *and* recording of gesture's loss—we have the first hint of what will unfold in the comparison to follow as a profound difference between Balázs and Agamben on the relation between the human and language.

Agamben sees in the proto-cinematic motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge "happy and visible twins" of the footprint traces left by Gilles de la Tourette's patients whose motor control was wrecked by nervous pathologies. The Lumière brothers's films confirm for Agamben the impression that the disorders diagnosed by Tourette in an unlucky few in the late 1800s have now become the norm; that, as we walk down modern city sidewalks "gesticulating frantically," we are all cases of a generalized

⁶⁷ Agamben, 53.

Tourettism.⁶⁸ Such is the lesson of watching silent movies at the end of the twentieth century. But how then does cinema also “reclaim” the loss of gesture it records? The answer is that the nature of the gesture that cinema reclaims is not identical to that which it has lost. Rather, according to the unfamiliar nature of urban modernity, gesture has been radically transformed by an historical shift in the relation between gesture and identity. Previously, gesture was aligned with an identity and expressive of that which was proper to it. This alignment had its external guarantee in the stability of a given social order. It is this mode of gesture that Agamben means when he refers to the bourgeoisie losing *their* gestures.⁶⁹ This loss results from the unhinging of exterior signs from interior states, in an inability to any longer coordinate the means of gesture with the end of subjectivity, thus making subjectivity an end in itself. “In this phase the bourgeoisie,” Agamben writes, “which just a few decades earlier was still firmly in possession of its symbols, succumbs to interiority and gives itself up to psychology.”⁷⁰

Like Balázs, Agamben defines cinema (contra Deleuze) as a medium whose proper element is not image but gesture. This is more than a formalist determination. To say that cinema is a medium of gesture is already for these thinkers to locate it on the terrain of politics and ethics. In Balázs’s and Agamben’s respective origin stories of

⁶⁸ Ibid, 52.

⁶⁹ One wonders how differently this narrative could be told from the point of view of the workers’ loss of their gestures under a Taylorist mode of production.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 53.

cinema, gesture is made to carry the historical burden for the visibility of the human *qua* human. There is an essentially recursive sense of cinema's historicity at work here in that cinema's arrival as an agent of redemption from the loss of gesture in the modern era is the very event that retrospectively makes that loss appear *in* history as cinema's condition of possibility. But while this recursive logic governs both Agamben's and Balázs's accounts, it is only Agamben who consciously attempts to thematize it. In Balázs, this logic does its work, to use a Hegelian formulation, behind the back of his theoretical assertions. One could say, in fact, that the fundamental difference between Agamben and Balázs in this regard is that Agamben explicitly appropriates the negativity of this recursive logic as the condition of possibility for thinking a relation between cinema and human gesture, whereas Balázs attempts to banish negativity altogether by casting cinema's redemption of humanity's lost gestures as the recovery operation of a purely positive essence. In a sense, we could say that Balázs's declaration that "[f]ilm is a fundamentally new revelation of humanity" (5) holds for Agamben as well. But then the decisive question becomes: what idea of the human does cinema reveal?

Their respective answers to this question turn on how Balázs and Agamben each understand the relation between gesture and language in cinema. Crucially, it is *silent* cinema to which they are referring, a medium that, by muting the content of verbal language, places the movements of the mouth on the plane of gesture. Agamben goes so

far as to make this a quality of all cinema when he writes of “[c]inema’s essential ‘silence’ (which has nothing to do with the presence or absence of a sound track)” as “pure gesturality.”⁷¹ With this in mind, we can more precisely pose the questions that will open up the profound difference in the consequences that Balázs and Agamben draw from the decision to tell cinema’s origin story as a narrative of loss and recovery. What does the appearance of gesture in silent cinema reveal about the relation of gesture to language? And, in turn, what does this relation reveal about the place of language in the idea of the human recovered (or produced) by cinema?

As we’ve seen, for Balázs silent cinema reveals an absolute opposition between gesture and language. What Agamben apprehends in silent cinema is just the opposite: a profound kinship between gesture and language, in which gesture communicates the nature of human embeddedness in language. For Agamben, gesture is mediation as such, a means without end, or, in Kantian terms, a display of purposiveness without a purpose. It shows, through the negativity of its lack of content, something that language itself cannot show — the essential “being-in-language” of human beings. “The gesture is, in this sense, communication of a communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality.”⁷²

⁷¹ Agamben, 60.

⁷² Agamben, 58.

When Agamben asserts that “[b]ecause cinema has its center in the gesture and not in the image, it belongs essentially to the realm of ethics and politics,”⁷³ he is invoking, above all, the Aristotelian determination of the human as the animal who speaks. But he is also invoking his own attempt to think a figure that would precede this determination. This figure, which he names “infancy,” exists in a state of openness with respect to language, before the division between voice and speech that gives the human being its content. As if to anticipate and round out our comparison with Balázs, Agamben invokes “the face” in a later essay as a figure for this very condition of openness:

The face’s revelation is revelation of language itself. Such a revelation, therefore, does not have any real content and does not tell the truth about this or that state of being, about this or that aspect of human beings and of the world: it is *only* opening, *only* communicability.⁷⁴

For Balázs the face represents the immediate expression of human essence; for Agamben, it is the human as pure mediation without essence. In Balázs we find an early 20th century conception of the face in cinema as the augur of a new humanism; in Agamben, a late-20th century conception of cinema as a mode of humanism’s radical self-questioning.

In the next and final section of this chapter, we will consider how Balázs’s internationalist humanism negotiates what we might call the “third rail” of any attempt

⁷³ Agamben, 55.

⁷⁴ Agamben, 92.

to place physiognomy in the service of a leftist project, not least in the context of inter-war Germany—the question of race.

2.9 Alien Races / Nature's Faces

But the greatest mystery here is this: how do we succeed in understanding a facial expression that we have never seen before? (31)

Balázs poses this question in a section of *Visible Man* entitled “Alien Races,” just after telling the following anecdote:

I remember the indelible impression once made on me by the face of one American Indian actress. In despair, she mourned her dead child, but she kept on smiling. This smile, by the time I had realized – and it did not take long – that it was the expression of her grief, struck me with the intensity of a spontaneous gesture that was neither traditional nor schematic. It had ceased to be the sign and symbol of grief, but had become instead its sudden, naked manifestation. (31)

Consider how Balázs stages this scene of recognition. First, in an initial moment of defamiliarization, the physiognomical expression of a smile appears as an alien sign by virtue of its unexpected referent (grief). This moment quickly gives way to (after clearing the way *for*) a deeper form of recognition as the smile reveals itself to Balázs as an immediate, natural expression of grief itself—not a semiotic at all, alien or otherwise. In the transition from the first to the second moment, sign becomes *Sein*. Without question, there is a Romantic mode of primitivist thought at work here, which places non-white contemporaries in an idyllic state of nature—that old chestnut of European racism—before the corruptions of modern civilization. For Balázs, as we’ve seen, that corruption is fundamentally about the atrophying of natural expressivity in a world

dominated by the abstractions of verbal language. "Have we not often observed," he writes in the title essay of *Visible Man*, "that primitive peoples have a stock of gestures that is richer than that of a highly educated European with a vast vocabulary at his disposal?" (11-12). In this moment of recognition, Balázs effectively figures cinema's physiognomic capacity in the clichéd story of a naïve anthropological encounter.

But there is also an interesting ambiguity in the passage. Here again we have a kind of confusion or slippage between physiognomy as perception and as expression. Balázs does not clarify whether his experience witnessing the smiling grief of the "American Indian actress" took place in the cinema. On one level, it does not seem to matter insofar as the expressivity of the non-European is imputed with powers on par with the perceptual powers of cinema. Just prior to the passage quoted above, however, in the same brief section on "Alien Races," Balázs also explains the fascination that "films with people from other races – Negroes, Chinese, American Indians and Eskimos" provoke in a (presumably) European spectator as deriving from the "capacity of film to show how changes in facial expressions arise from the nature not of the individual but of the race" (30). This capacity, which is now a function of film's perceptivity rather than the expressivity of its object, produces a different sequence of defamiliarization and recognition as "[c]ertain essential physiognomical expressions that we do not notice in our own kind strike us with fresh force when we see them in foreign

faces" (30). This effectively opens a gap between "expression" and "type" that means all faces are internally split.

We can clarify the significance of that gap opened between type and expression in the scene of "native" recognition above by putting that racialized scene into relation with another: to the one nakedly eugenic moment in Balázs's *Visible Man*. This moment occurs near the end of the title essay, just prior to the final triumphalist sentences that declare "when man finally becomes visible, he will always recognize himself, despite the gulf between widely differing languages." This visibility, it turns out, is not only a question of revelation but is also the accomplishment of standardization for the international market; and the universally recognizable "man" thus made visible is (at least in this passage) the *white man*:

We may say that the language of gestures has become standardized in film. It follows from this that a kind of standard psychology of the white race has now taken shape and this forms the bedrock of every film story. ... It contains the first living seeds of the standard white man who will one day emerge as the synthesis of the mix of different races and peoples. The cinematograph is a machine that in its own way will create a living, concrete internationalism: *the unique, shared psyche of the white man*. We can go further. By suggesting a uniform ideal of beauty as the universal goal of selective breeding, the film will help to produce a uniform type of the white race. (14-5)

This rather infamous passage has only recently been made available to an Anglophone readership by the English translation of *Visible Man* in its entirety. Among Germanist

film scholars, characterizations of this passage range from “very problematic”⁷⁵ (Sabine Hake) to “profoundly shocking”⁷⁶ (Erica Carter) to, at their most strident, “open racism”⁷⁷ (Thomas Elsaesser). This unease is understandable, given Balázs’s choice of physiognomy as his master term with its long history of deployment in pseudo-scientific racist and colonial projects.⁷⁸ Balázs himself seems to have abandoned the idea of cinema’s “visible man” as explicitly racialized (or perhaps de-racialized is more accurate given the standard ideology of whiteness.) In *Der Geist des Films* (*Spirit of Film*), published six years later, race no longer figures as a category at all. And when he reworked the title essay of *Visible Man* for *Iskusstvo Kino* (*The Theory of Film*) in 1942,

⁷⁵ Hake, *The Cinema’s Third Machine*, 231.

⁷⁶ Erica Carter, “Introduction” in *Béla Balázs : Early Film Theory*, xxxvii.

⁷⁷ Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory : an Introduction through the Senses* (New York: Routledge,, 2010), 194.

⁷⁸ The most proximate of such projects to Balázs was, of course, the rise of Nazism, which had a direct bearing upon his situation as a Jewish intellectual living in Vienna and Berlin from 1919 to 1931 until his immigration to Moscow. We might also note in this connection his collaboration with Leni Riefensthal on *The Blue Light* and her subsequent disavowal of him and “the claims of the Jew Béla Balázs on me” for his share of the film’s profits (Zsuffa, 230), as well as the appropriation of his writings by Third Reich film ideologues. It is also worth noting an earlier incident in his professional life as a film critic where the economic imperatives of international distribution collided in his view with the racist representations of a film. His extremely negative review of *Birth of a Nation* for *Der Tag* ended by his calling for the film to be banned from exhibition: “This film was made by the great director Griffith with the great actress Lillian Gish. So much the greater and more penetrating is the vulgarity it represents. To be sure art often is—and film art even more often than the other arts—a dangerous whore. But something so base as this race-protective inflammatory propaganda even the film industry hardly ever produced!” (Zsuffa, 126). According to Balázs’s biographer, the distribution-exhibition interests in Vienna successfully brought pressure on *Der Tag* to fire Balázs as its film reviewer.

Balázs abandons the idea that standardization would yield a uniform racial type and instead softens the effect of the international film market to “leveling physical differences between the various races and nations.”⁷⁹

Nevertheless, it is worth returning to this moment when Balázs gives the “visible man” of cinema the identity of “the standard white man” as something more than a momentary lapse. Setting moral judgments aside, it is worth asking whether this passage in fact provides a clarity of insight (however unwitting on Balázs’s part) into the basic operation of producing an idea of the face in cinema as the immediate expression of human essence. What Balázs poses in a positive mode in this passage bears a striking resemblance to certain aspects of Deleuze and Guattari’s well-known critique of the faciality in *A Thousand Plateaus*. “The face is not a universal,” they write. “It is not even that of the white man; it is White Man himself...”⁸⁰ They go on to describe the dominant operation of European racism as a process of inclusion rather than exclusion:

European racism as the white man’s claim has never operated by exclusion, or by the designation of someone as Other: it is instead in primitive societies that the stranger is grasped as ‘other.’ Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face...⁸¹

⁷⁹ Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film ; (character and Growth of a New Art)* (New York, NY: Dover Publ., 1970), 45.

⁸⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 176.

⁸¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 178.

If we accept the terms of this critique, it seems beside the point to condemn Balázs's passage for a racism that "excludes 'non-white people' from participating in [cinema's] universal culture"⁸² or to mitigate it by elucidating elements in the rest of his inter-war writings that "rendered untenable his repudiation of racial otherness."⁸³ In fact, these critical responses presume a humanist norm that in fact remains quite close to Balázs's own ideal—to repeat, this is an ideal of inclusion rather than exclusion. Balázs's vision of the economic engine of cinema's world market is a kind of miscegenation machine that will produce the "standard white man" from the "synthesis of the mix of different races and peoples." This vision would be purely anathema to the aim of studies of racial physiognomy developed in the 1920s and '30s by figures like Hans F.K. Günther and Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss, proponents of the *Nordische Bewegung* [Nordic Movement], who used physiognomy to identify the distinctive traits of the Nordic race in their fight against what they called *Entnordung*, the "de-Nordification" produced by race mixing.⁸⁴

If this is not the eugenic project that Balázs has in mind in the passage above—and it clearly is not—how then are we to understand his final claim that by "suggesting a uniform ideal of beauty as the universal goal of selective breeding, the film will help to produce a uniform type of the white race"? It is important to recall that what Balázs

⁸² Elsaesser and Hagener, *Film Theory*, 195.

⁸³ Erica Carter, "Introduction," xxxviii.

⁸⁴ See Gray, *About Face*, chapters 6 & 7.

thinks cinema's internationalist synthesis of races will produce is not, in the first instance, a body but an interiority: "*the unique, shared psyche of the white man.*" When Balázs invokes the ideal of "beauty," he means the outward expression of this interiority as an emblem of morality. He confirms this reading later in the text via reference to his Romantic pole stars, Goethe and Kant:

'Be of good cheer!' says Goethe. In film there is no such thing as the 'purely' external or 'empty' decoration. In film, everything internal becomes visible in something external; it follows that *everything external testifies to an internal reality*. This includes beauty.

In film the beauty of the human face functions as physiognomical expression. Anatomical form functions as human expression. Kant's statement that 'beauty is the symbol of morality' is made reality in the film. (30)

Therefore, the discomfiting instance of Balázs elevating the "white man's face" into the universal figure for his idea of cinema's "visible man" is in fact a function of his fundamental commitment to form as the univocal expression of a static human essence. Rather than marking that instance as an embarrassing lapse, it would perhaps be better to see it as a moment of truth for what the dream of immediate recognition comes to.

3. Eisenstein's "Formal Ecstasy": Typage and Plasticity

3.1 Introduction

In a famous essay from the 1929, Sergei Eisenstein complains about the intrusion of the European acting style into Soviet cinema, one that privileges the display of "emotional transitions" in the image of a "single changing face."¹ As we've seen in the previous chapter, it is just such an image that lies at the heart of Béla Balázs's conception of cinema's essence as an art of physiognomy. Nowhere is cinematic specificity more concentrated for Balázs than in its capacity to capture the polyphonous play of facial expressions (*Mienenspiel*) in close-up; it is nothing less, he claims, than the direct manifestation of Bergsonian *durée* as image. To the contrary, Eisenstein's complaint is that this image forces the art of cinema to "mark time."² The medium's continued progression as an art lies in rejecting this image of a single changing face for the sake of an approach exemplified for Eisenstein by the transitionless or "cut" acting in Kabuki theater. The proper cinematic heir to this approach is his conception of typage (*tipazh*), which emphasizes a mask-like or caricature face, the intelligibility of which depends

¹ Sergei Eisenstein, "Beyond the Shot" in *Sergei Eisenstein Selected Works: Vol.I, Writings, 1922-34*. Ed. and Transl. Richard Taylor. London: I.B. Tauris, 1988, 2010, p. 148. [Hereafter SW1.]

² Ibid.

upon its formal rigidity. This essential quality — what Eisenstein calls “organic resistance” — is the very opposite of Balázs’s conception of physiognomy.³ As I contend in the previous chapter, even as Balázs disavows Lavater’s physiognomy for the sake of Goethe’s dynamic morphology, his commitment to the revelation of a singular human essence puts Balázs finally in company with the former, his fellow “man-loving physiognomist” and his desire for the static transparency of silhouettes and corpses.

Construed narrowly as a method of casting non-actors for their physical resemblance to social types, typage is usually associated with Eisenstein’s films from the first great period of Soviet cinema (1924-29). But just as montage signifies far more than an editing technique for Eisenstein, typage too has the status of a general concept in his theory and practice. In its broadest register as a notion of *typicality*, typage is “the signifier of the entire construction obtaining at a particular period.”⁴ By beginning with a consideration of how Eisenstein’s method of typage is indebted to his early theatrical experience with the comedy of masks (*commedia dell’arte*) and, especially, to his lifelong fascination with caricature and drawing, I will attempt to demonstrate how it concentrates a central tendency that runs through all of his work. What typage shares with these other aesthetic traditions is a quality Eisenstein calls “extreme laconicism,” an

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sergei Eisenstein, “Theatre and Cinema” [1934] in *Sergei Eisenstein Selected Works: Vol. III, Writings, 1934-47*. Ed. Richard Taylor. Trans. William Powell. London: I.B. Tauris, 1996, 2010, p. 11. [Hereafter SW3]

economy of effect that enables a mode of recognition (*anagnorisis*) dependent neither on psychological identification nor narrative unfolding but produced instead through the direct impression of a graphic form.

In this way, my approach in this chapter stakes a claim in one of the central debates in Eisenstein scholarship of the past three decades concerning the relationship between his early work in the 1920s and his later work from the early 1930s onward. There is no question that the character of Eisenstein's films as well as his theoretical writings changes significantly over the course of his career. At issue, as it usually is with such debates, is whether this change constitutes a break or a continuous development, whether there are in effect two Eisensteins—an early “constructivist Eisenstein” and a later “organicist Eisenstein”—or whether, instead, these tendencies name two aspects of a single Eisenstein that co-exist in various, often conflicting arrangements at different moments throughout all of his work.⁵ My reading of Eisenstein in this chapter is aligned with the latter position.⁶ The figure of the face offers an especially productive terrain for exploring the juncture of constructivism and organicism in Eisenstein's thought.

⁵ David Bordwell put this question on the agenda with an essay published by *Screen* in 1974-75 arguing the case for a strong shift between the early and late Eisenstein. David Bordwell, “Eisenstein's Epistemological Shift,” *Screen* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1974/75): 29-46.

⁶ This position is elaborated most prominently in the work of Jacques Aumont, François Albera, Mikhail Iampolski, Anne Nesbet, and Masha Salazkina See Jacques Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*. Trans. Lee Hidreth, Constance Penley, and Andrew Ross (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); François Albera, “Eisenstein and the Theory of the Photogram,” in *Eisenstein Rediscovered*. Ed. Ian Christie and Richard Taylor (London: Routledge, 1993); Mikhail Iampolski, “The Invisible

While Eisenstein's approach to the face maintains a law of organic unity—the essential dimension of the face as an aesthetic form for Georg Simmel—this organicism is not achieved through the direct intuition of movement so crucial to Balázs's concept of physiognomy and the Bergsonian vitalism informing it. If a change to any one feature of the face changes the impression of the whole, such changes are not reabsorbed in the *durée* of a moving face. Rather, for Eisenstein, changes are registered graphically as juxtaposed elements in the conflictual unity of a montaged mask. In her account of plasticity, Catherine Malabou notes this same formal difference from the “polymorphism” of “infinite modifiability.” Rather, for Malabou as for Eisenstein, plasticity means the “possibility of *displacing* or *transforming* the mark or the imprint, of changing determination in some way.”⁷

3.2 Infinite Types: Typage as Comedic Anagnôrisis

Eisenstein never claimed typage as his own invention. Like montage, it was a term in general circulation among Soviet filmmakers in the 1920s. In his periodizations of Soviet film history, Eisenstein consistently coupled typage with montage as one of the

Text as a Universal Equivalent: Sergei Eisenstein” in *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film*. Trans. Harsha Ram (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Anne Nesbet, *Savage Junctures: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003); Masha Salazkina, *In Excess: Sergei Eisenstein's Mexico* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁷ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (New York: Fordham University Press,, n.d.), 16.

“general tendencies” of the first period (1924-29). As he puts it, the device was “refracted differently” in the work of the period’s principle filmmakers: from Vertov’s “factographic” approach, to Kuleshov’s notion of the “model actor” (*naturshchik*), to Pudovkin’s scenario-based method.⁸ Nevertheless, Eisenstein was the name most closely associated with typage, and, for a time, especially in the immediate wake of *Battleship Potemkin*’s success, that association gave the method its greatest prestige.⁹

As a concept, however, typage has a peculiar status in Eisenstein’s theory. Perhaps due to its very familiarity, it seems to suffer from a presumption of self-evidence within Eisenstein’s own writings (as well as the voluminous secondary literature) in a way that montage never has. Unlike montage, which dominates his writing in the 1920s, it does not play a significant role in his major essays from this period, the very time when the device was so conspicuously present in his filmmaking. It is not until the early to mid-1930s that we find any extended discussions of typage, and then mostly in lectures, at which point Eisenstein treats it retrospectively rather than as an active element of his theory and practice. These retrospective accounts are at their most illuminating when he is describing his transition from the Proletkult theater to making his first film, *Strike* (1925). As Eisenstein tells it a decade hence, typage figures

⁸ SW3 17-18.

⁹ Denise Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular cinema and Soviet society in the 1920s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. p. 91.

centrally in his story of this transition. In fact, the most elaborate discussion of typage appears in a 1934 lecture titled “Theater and Cinema” for a course on direction at the State Institute for Cinema (GIK, later VGIK), a lecture he delivered during the very time he was returning to theater after a ten-year hiatus.¹⁰ Eisenstein describes his movement from theater to cinema in terms of an organic leap into a new quality rather than a break: at the moment when theater had reached its limit with Proletkult it “grew into” cinema. Along with montage, the other primary path of that growth led directly from *commedia dell’arte* to typage. “It transpires that the most theatrical phenomenon, that is the comedy of masks, is transformed into a feature of the maximal purity of cinema.”¹¹

This transformation produces two remarkable changes. The first concerns how the audience is understood to recognize types. In *commedia dell’arte*, stock masks present a “defined character passport” —stamped with stylized traits reinforced for the audience over years of repetition—which is recognized the moment they arrive on stage.¹² An analogous economy of recognition is at work in Eisenstein’s conception of cinematic typage. Which is why it is possible for typage to fulfill one of the basic criteria of a film

¹⁰ As it happened, this return was ill-fated. While Eisenstein was working on the production of Natan A. Zarkhi’s play *Moscow 2* for the Theater of the Revolution, Zarkhi was killed in a car accident and the production was shut down. Eisenstein’s successful return to the stage would not occur until his production of Wagner’s *Die Walküre* at the Bolshoi Theater in 1940.

¹¹ SW3 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 8.

“attraction” —its effects are calculable in advance—so that without making recourse to psychological expression or narrative development the filmmaker can “know that, when I present this face, the entire audience will know what is going on.”¹³ The crucial difference is that the economy of recognition in typage derives from a horizon of experience unbounded by the conventions of theater or any other artistic tradition. “[I]n typage,” Eisenstein remarks, “you invariably present a particular audience with a face that expresses everything on the basis of social experience (and not only social but also biological experience).”¹⁴ Unlike the form of habitual recognition in the comedy of masks that depends upon the audience’s familiarity with the stylizations of specific, finite characters, in cinematic typage it is possible to recognize a character one has never seen before because “the sum of their physiological features disposes us towards them in a particular way.”¹⁵ Here Eisenstein simply passes over the question of what precisely constitutes the link of recognition between social and biological “experience” and the physiological features of a particular face.

The second change that accompanies the transformation of *commedia dell’arte* into typage is a kind of counterpart on the side of the image to the expansion of the horizon of reception in the first. Whereas *commedia dell’arte* uses a set of seven or eight stock

¹³ Ibid., 9.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

characters, typage in cinema works with a potentially *infinite* number. No simple crossing of a numerical threshold, such a transformation would seem to virtually define the leap from quantity to quality. It begs the question of what idea of type can persist in a domain of infinite characters. In the comedy of masks there is a one-to-one relationship between type and character that adheres in the stylization of the masks as an identity of content and form. Many of Eisenstein's typage constructions, especially in the early films, continue to work in an analogous mode. The stylization of the fat capitalists in *Strike*, for example, with their top hats and cigars, reproduces more or less directly the types drawn by George Grosz in *The Face of the Ruling Class* (1921). Here the type possesses a set of representational traits that pre-exist the selection of characters that could potentially incarnate it. In other cases, however, Eisenstein presents entirely singular types. We might think, for example, of Marfa Lapkina in *The General Line* or Stepok in *Bezhin Meadow*. In these cases, the operation appears reversed. It is as though Eisenstein's act of selecting of a face itself produces the type it is meant to represent. The copy produces its model. In this way, the problematic of typage is not just about aligning a potentially infinite number of characters with a finite number of types. Rather, it comes closer to a paradoxical notion of infinite types. How are we to understand this apparent paradox? Does cinematic typage somehow possess the potential to convert any face into its own singular yet immediately recognizable type,

and if so, at what point in this process does the very logic of the type dissolve into sheer multiplicity?

As is the case with so much else in Eisenstein's early work, we can begin to clarify this question by reference to his most proximate enemy of the 1920s—Dziga Vertov and the Kino-Eye group—whose repudiation of the fictional (or “played”) film and concurrent demand for the use of non-actors would seem to endorse some form of typage. Perhaps for reason of this apparent affinity¹⁶ Eisenstein explicitly distinguishes typage from Vertov's “factographic” approach to filming non-actors, which he disparages as the attempt to capture a “naturalistic mug shot.”¹⁷ Selecting a type is not a matter of putting cinema at the service of documentary truth. If you need an actor to play an old craftsman, Eisenstein tells his students at the State Institute for Cinema (GIK), “you don't go to a workshop and pick out the first craftsman who has been there since before the Revolution. Not at all.”¹⁸ For Eisenstein, typage demands the artistic selection of a “realistic” face. Of course, this simply names rather than solves the problem. In 1921, Roman Jakobson diagnosed the great confusion attending the use of

¹⁶ Eisenstein was sensitive to the suggestion that early films were in any way indebted to Vertov and the methods developed by the *Kino-Eye* group. See Dziga Vertov's “Kino-Eye on *Strike*” and Eisenstein's response in “The Problem of the Materialist Approach to Film” both collected in *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, Ed. Yuri Tsivian.

¹⁷ SW3 9

¹⁸ SW3 9

the term “realism” in literary, artistic, and critical circles. Depending on one’s orientation, realism could mean the habitual recognition afforded by a conventional form of verisimilitude or the disruption of recognition produced by the deformation of convention. Given this essential ambiguity, both Tolstoy and Futurism can be heralded under the banner of realism. The term, in Jakobson’s account, is forever caught up in a dialectic whereby verisimilitude becomes mere convention and must in turn be deformed in order to rescue verisimilitude from the habitual recognition of convention, and on and on. He describes this dynamic with respect to painting and visual perception in the following way:

As tradition accumulates, the painted image becomes an ideogram, a formula, to which the object portrayed is linked by contiguity. Recognition becomes instantaneous. We no longer see a picture. The ideogram needs to be deformed. The artist-innovator must impose a new form upon our perception, if we are to detect in a given thing those traits which went unnoticed the day before.¹⁹

On the one hand, Eisenstein’s method of typage might seem to participate in this general dialectic of recognition and defamiliarization (albeit violently) insofar as it falls under his notion of a “cinema of attractions,” with its aim of producing shocks and agitations in an otherwise complacent spectator. “The method of agitation through spectacle,” Eisenstein writes in his second great manifesto on attractions, “consists in the creation of a new chain of conditioned reflexes by associating selected phenomena with the

¹⁹ Roman Jakobson, “On Realism in Art” in Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska, *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 39-40.

unconditioned reflexes they produce.”²⁰ On the other hand, typage functions precisely through the ideographic mechanism of “instantaneous” recognition that the Russian Formalists took as the great enemy of art as well as experience.

Moreover, as we will see in detail in this chapter, Eisenstein actively opposes the criteria of verisimilitude in realism. This is already evident in his attack upon Vertov’s “factography.” For Eisenstein the problem of a “realistic” typage cannot be resolved by making recourse to a realism adhering in the technical dimensions of the film medium. In fact, he stands out not only in the Soviet context but in the so-called “classical” era of film theory generally for what Mikhail Iampolskii has described as his “radical denial of the usual notion of cinematic mimesis.”²¹ That “usual notion” is a conception of film grounded in its photographic properties of iconic identity and indexical causality, properties which have traditionally provided the basis for a techno-ontological determination of medium specificity in a certain strain of realist film theory, represented, for example, by the work of Eisenstein’s German contemporary Siegfried Kracauer. With typage the genetic link Eisenstein insists upon between theater and cinema is essential. The question is how the mode of recognition that so attracted

²⁰ SW 1 45

²¹ Mikhail Yampolsky, “The essential bone structure: Mimesis in Eisenstein.” Trans. Richard Taylor in *Eisenstein Rediscovered* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 177.

Eisenstein in the comedy of masks is taken up and transformed by cinema with its own means. But first, we must clarify that mode.²²

Unlike the Aristotelian theory of tragic *anagnôrisis* (recognition) wherein character is revealed through the unfolding of narrative action, the stock characters in *commedia dell'arte* are codified in advance so that the audience recognizes them the moment they appear on stage. Because there is no necessary relation between character and action, a relatively invariable set of characters can be put into play within an extraordinary variety of situations and arrangements. What distinguishes one comedy of masks from others is not the revelation of a singular character but rather its novel assemblage of ready-made characters. Eisenstein seizes upon this as a principle of montage. The relative invariability of types ("appropriately called not characters, but masks") enables a remarkable freedom of construction: "they are a kaleidoscope of hieroglyphs, complete in themselves, which are combined into any number of patterns of the arbitrary plots of the comedy of masks."²³ Thus, while the tragic hero undergoes a

²² In this initial examination of recognition and type we will be essentially following Eisenstein's advice from *Montage*: "For years now, we have been stressing the link between theatre and cinema, as between two stages of development ... So, when we need to analyse or throw light on some aspect of cinema, it is always methodologically advisable to remember that link, and to begin the analysis with an appropriate example from the theatre, gradually proceeding to a new stage of the same phenomenon in that new phase of theatre which is cinema..." SW2 15.

²³ That this latter description appears in Eisenstein's notes on Walt Disney, whose early animations he revered precisely for their formal freedom, is suggestive. p. 147.

single profound change at the moment of *anagnôrisis* (a change that is not a transformation but a revelation of a previously hidden knowledge), the characters in a comedy of masks can be arranged in a constantly changing and quasi-infinite number of configurations.

In his exhaustive study of recognition in the history of poetics, Terrance Cave argues that this essentially comedic mode of recognition shadows the tragic and constantly threatens to discredit it. Compared to *mimesis*, *hamartia*, or *catharsis*, *anagnôrisis* is the “least respectable term in Aristotelian poetics” because it is “reputed to be an implausible contrivance, a shoddy way of resolving a plot the author can no longer control.”²⁴ The more transparently device-like it is, the more likely it tends to impose itself as an unwanted “emblem of comedy” in the midst of a tragedy.²⁵ This problem is reflected in Aristotle’s taxonomy in the *Poetics*, which hierarchizes the means for producing recognition. The highest means are narrative, “arising plausibly from the incidents themselves,” with the exemplar being Oedipus’s recognition of his true identity.²⁶ The lowest means involve physical signs on a character’s body, like scars, birthmarks, or necklaces—here Odysseus’s scar is the exemplar.

²⁴ Terence Cave, *Recognitions : a Study in Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1988), 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Poetics*. Trans. Ingram Bywater (New York: The Modern Library, 1954,1984). [1454b19 – 1455a21].

What Eisenstein's conception of typage carries over from the comedy of masks is the inversion of this classical hierarchy of means for recognition. Instead of appearing as a moment in a larger poetic structure, this mode of recognition is a formal effect. If it is "immediate" in this sense, it is nevertheless thoroughly embedded in the concrete mediation of form. As we will see in the next section, the other artistic tradition that greatly influenced Eisenstein's approach to typage—caricature—takes the comedic inversion of classical recognition even further by exaggerating a single physical trait to the point where it stands in for the whole.

3.3 Typage as Caricature: A Juncture of Opposites

The paradox of infinite types is of course a political as well as an aesthetic problem, one linked with 19th-century urbanization and the historical emergence of the masses as new forms of social mobility and circulation unmoored social appearances from their traditional identities. In *Une Fille d'Eve*, Henri Balzac describes a newly formed world of "infinite nuances" wrought by social mobility, complaining that, whereas previously, "the caste system gave each person a physiognomy which was more important than the individual; today the individual gets his physiognomy from himself."²⁷ If the art of caricature experienced a renaissance in this social context, it was

²⁷ Qtd. in Peter Brooks, "The Text of the City," *Oppositions*, Vol. 8, 1977: 7-11.

because it held out the promise of reestablishing the intelligibility of social types.²⁸ Long before Eisenstein encountered the comedy of masks in Meyerhold's theater, he had an intense interest in the art of caricature—especially the 19th-century French caricaturists Grandville, Charles Philippon, André Gill, and, above all, Honoré Daumier—and in many his conception of typage is equally if not more indebted to this tradition.²⁹

At a formal level, the problem caricature responds to concerns the very gap that typage occupies between “character” and “type,” or individual and class, or, more abstractly yet, between the levels of particularity and the generality. The first-person experience of this gap is given a rather precise description by the narrator of that great literary touchstone of 19th-century urbanization and massification, Edgar Allen Poe's short story “The Man of the Crowd” (1840). As he gazes out the window of a London coffee shop watching throng of people in the street, his attention jumps from one level to the other seemingly without mediation: “At first my observations took an abstract and

²⁸ For a survey of 19th-century caricature in the French context, see: Judith Wechsler, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in 19th Century Paris*. Foreward by Richard Sennett. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 29.

²⁹ In his memoirs, Eisenstein offers the following tribute to his life-long devotion to Daumier's drawings: “But my admiration for Honoré Daumier was boundless. I was so captivated by him that the very, very first book I ever bought of my own choice was a modest monograph on Daumier (a purchase accomplished in conspiracy with my governess, who secreted the needed sum from her expense money). I was ten at the time. So it goes.” Sergei Eisenstein and Herbert Marshall, *Immoral Memories : an Autobiography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 206.

generalizing turn. I looked at the passengers in masses, and even thought of them in their aggregate relations. Soon, however, I descended to details, and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance.”³⁰ If caricature bridges this gap, it is not through a mediation but a short-circuit. Theodor Adorno describes how this works in the caricatures of Eisenstein’s beloved Daumier specifically:

he assigns a very special status to the concept of the type: in each image of the particular, as rendered in an outsize nose or a set of bony shoulders, an image of the general is to be captured at the same time...³¹

Eisenstein’s conception of typage also participates in this curious dialectic of caricature: only by exaggerating the most particular trait is it possible to produce an image of the type.

In this respect, typage is linked to one of the key concepts of Eisenstein’s late aesthetics—the principle of *pars pro toto* (the part for the whole)—and as such has far more general status in Eisenstein’s writings than is usually thought to be the case. In the multi-volume history of cinema he was planning to write, he intended to make the close-up the device whereby *pars pro toto* emerges in cinema. In his notes for a *General History of Cinema*, Eisenstein describes a kind of two-stage history for *pars pro toto*. It first arises

³⁰ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 230.

³¹ Theodor Adorno, “Letter to W. Benjamin,” reprinted in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1996) vol. 4, p. 203.

as what he calls “pre-synecdoche,” in which the part is simply “any one of all possible details.” Eisenstein’s example here is Griffith’s “informational close-up,” an arbitrary element cut out of the spatial temporal whole and enlarged. In its next phase, *pars pro toto* accomplishes the transition to a fully realized synecdoche in which the detail now bears a necessary relation to the whole: it is “the *typical one*—as the *only* one substituting for the whole.”³² Now the exemplar of *pars pro toto* is “our close-up,” to be found, for example, in the shot of the ship doctor’s *pince-nez* in *Battleship Potemkin*.

Returning to the question of typage as an instance of *pars pro toto*, it is necessary to avoid a potential conflation. Given the close association of the face with the close-up in the history of cinema, there is an obvious temptation to reduce typage to a mere function of the close-up. For Eisenstein, however, there is no necessary relation between typage and the close-up. It is simply that both participate in the logic of *pars pro toto*, whether independently or in concert. And just as Eisenstein insists that the close-up did not originate with the invention of film, neither did typage.

When Eisenstein discusses typage as a matter of practical artistic judgment, he transposes this problem of recognizable types from a question of aligning quasi-infinite particular faces with a finite set of general types into a tension internal to the representational form of faces themselves. In doing so, he casts particularity and generality as the poles of “naturalism” and “conventionalism.” A typage construction

³² Eisenstein, *Notes*, TEXT 4: “In Praise of Documentary,” p.7. (Emphasis added.)

will fail to bring its effect across if it errs too far in the direction of one pole or the other. At one extreme, it risks sinking into naturalist particularity and becoming “no more than a face, plain and simple, rather than a typical collective face.” At the other, it risks the “deadness” of repetition and generalization, passing “over into hieroglyphics” and losing its “pictorial effectivity.”³³ But this way of posing the problem is misleading inasmuch as it suggests that an effective type requires splitting the difference between these poles, as if it were a matter of adding or subtracting a quantum of the natural here or the conventional there. To the contrary, the entire force of the paradoxical syntagm of *infinite types* lies precisely in short-circuiting the resolution of a middle course or average. In this respect, the most incisive approach to this idea of infinite types may not be Eisenstein’s direct remarks on type. It is instead to be found in his famous doctrine of the juncture of opposites. “The extremes meet”³⁴ in a direct coincidence between the levels of the particular and the general. He concludes this famous essay with reference to another figure for this juncture—which we’ve identified as the *making typical* of type and caricature alike—Kleist’s ideal of the actor from his essay on puppets: “The

³³ Ibid., 10.

³⁴ That slogan concludes Eisenstein’s celebrated essay on Kabuki theater which, it is worth recalling, begins with a polemic against the common dismissal of Kabuki for its extreme conventionalism. Eisenstein, “An Unexpected Juncture” [1928], *SW1*, 122.

perfection of the actor lies either in the body that has no consciousness at all or has the maximum consciousness, that is, in the puppet or the 'demi-god.'"³⁵

In order to clarify the implications of this approach to typicality, it is useful to consider it in contradistinction to modern strategies for producing types as *averages* rather than as junctures between the particular and the general. We will now turn to two such counterexamples: the first from the hostile political and cultural milieu in which Eisenstein increasingly found himself from the early 1930s onward; the second from a nineteenth-century confrontation between caricature and a positivist application of the proto-cinematic technique of composite photography. For both cases, we can characterize the fundamental difference between Eisenstein's typage (at least in the account of it I've attempted to develop here) and these other approaches with his own succinct characterization in the *Notes* of the "basic phenomenon" of cinema itself: "A dynamic juxtaposition instead of mixing together."³⁶

3.3.1 From "Living Man" to "Image" [*Obraz*]

If we accept that Eisenstein's idea of typicality is best understood under his doctrine of the juncture of opposites, how should we interpret the fact that Eisenstein's remarks on typage in the early to mid-1930s nevertheless tend to emphasize the idea of a balance rather than a juncture? To begin with, his remarks quoted above regarding the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Eisenstein, *Notes*, TEXT 1, p. 3.

need for a balance between the vital particularity of “naturalism” and the generality of “conventionalism” need to be considered carefully within the ideological context of their moment. By that time, typeage was thoroughly associated with the formalism that had been under assault in official Soviet culture since the late 1920s. In the years leading up to the adaptation of Socialist Realism as the official doctrine for Soviet cinema in 1935, the slogan of the “the living man” was one of the primary means by which that assault was carried out. Conceived and promoted by the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) this slogan focused the broadly vitalist theme of “life” overcoming the sterile intellectualism of “form” into a representational norm for the correct portrayal of socialist characters. Representing the “living man” in the work of art meant depicting a character’s vital attributes and particularities, with an emphasis on psychology. It was precisely such psychologism that the ideographic strategy of typeage was intended to overcome in the first place. But if in 1929 Eisenstein could still publicly attack the “the living man” as the regressive imposition of a “right-wing deviation” upon Soviet cinema,³⁷ by 1937 he is compelled in an official statement of self-criticism to adopt its

³⁷ Eisenstein, “Perspectives” [1929], *SW1*, 159. In the course of this same attack on the “living man” Eisenstein makes what is perhaps the single most Surrealist statement in all of his writings: “cinema is as suited to you [the living man] and you to cinema as is the second hand of a stop-watch to the gutting of a white fish.” (Ibid.) As Eisenstein knew all too well, his doctrine of the juncture of opposites bore an undeniable resemblance to the surrealist formula of an image as the juxtaposition of objects that normally stand at a maximal distance. Whatever hostility Eisenstein expressed toward Surrealism as a movement, it is entirely fitting that such an infinity would appear in an assault on the “living man” as a false average.

very terms in renouncing the typage tendencies that contributed to the “catastrophe” of *Bezhin Meadow*.

[I]n regard to the appearance of the cast. These were not living faces but masks: the ultimate generalization of ‘typicality’ [*tipichnost*], as distinct from a real face. In their behavior, the emphasis was on stasis, where the static frozen face was like ‘the mask of a gesture’ just as a mask was the ultimate generalization of a dead face.³⁸

Yet this is only one side of the delicate operation of self-denunciation that Eisenstein was called upon to perform. For just as it was possible in the view of the censors to err on the side of “dead” generalization, it was equally possible to place too much emphasis on the particularity of life’s manifestations to the *detriment* of typicality. Thus Eisenstein criticizes the central episode of *Bezhin Meadow*—a kulak father murdering his Young Pioneer son—for being “not in the least bit characteristic.” While the incident was in fact taken from real life (“such things had happened”) it was nevertheless “not a *typical* episode. Quite the opposite: it is exceptional, unique and uncharacteristic.”³⁹

Eisenstein’s balancing act in “The Mistakes of *Bezhin Meadow*” over the problem of typicality reflects a basic contradiction at work in the vitalist canon of Socialist Realism. According to Mikhail Iampolski, this canon attempted to enforce two incompatible normative demands: “On one hand, it fostered the attitude that life was to

³⁸ Eisenstein, “The Mistakes of *Bezhin Meadow*” [1937], SW3, 102.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 101. (Emphasis added.)

be maximally reflected in all its manifestations. But, on the other hand, emphasizing any element was perceived as elevating a part to the detriment of the whole, hence as a sign of formalism."⁴⁰ What resulted was an impossible demand for "perfect averageness, for some 'apothecaries' weight' of all components."⁴¹ This demand for averageness ultimately proved incompatible with the doctrine of the "living man." In order to move beyond the "dead" abstraction of typical characters, artists began endowing heroes with negative traits and villains with positive ones. This strategy for introducing the complexities of "life" into the psychology of characters became intolerable to the censors; so the "living man" too was "soon persecuted, and works which placed him at the center were criticized for naturalism or biologism, with their own vicious excesses in the war against formalist abstraction and generalization thus exposed."⁴²

This essentially unstable ideological demand for averageness, which led first to the championing and then the denunciation of the "living man," ultimately found a kind of resolution in a concept that was sufficiently vague to accommodate its contradictions—the "image" [*obraz*]. The Russian term *obraz* translates not only as "image" but also "shape," "form," "appearance," "mode," "manner," "way," and, most

⁴⁰ Mikhail Iampolski, "Censorship as the Triumph of Life," in *Socialist Realism Without Shores*. Eds. Evgeniĭ Aleksandrovich Dobrenko and Thomas Lahusen. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997, p. 172.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 173.

significantly for our discussion, “type” and “figure.” Originally a concept in religious art dating to the Byzantine tradition, Iampolski describes the recuperation of “image” [*obraz*] in the context of Socialist Realism as “an amorphous construct that combined aspects of typification and averageness with those of life’s elementary vitality.”⁴³ This doctrine of the “image” enabled the continuation of the oxymoronic ideal of an average or typical hero, a figure who incarnated the very best attributes of vitality while remaining entirely “within the bounds of the average, with all extremes blandly balanced.”⁴⁴

From 1937 onward—which is to say after the public humiliation of the denunciation and physical destruction of *Bezhin Meadow*, as well as his letter of self-criticism—Eisenstein too adopted the “image” [*obraz*] as a central category in his writings. But whatever ideological cover the concept’s vagueness may have provided for Soviet cultural production generally, it is clear that Eisenstein’s explorations of the “image” carry forward and even sharpen his “formalist” interest in the problematic of typage (albeit without using the term).⁴⁵ This is especially evident in his unfinished book

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 174.

⁴⁵ Jacques Aumont has also noted that the “presuppositions” of typage are “very closely related to the concept of the ‘global image’ [*obraz*].” Unfortunately, he does not elaborate upon this claim. Jacques Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein*. London: BFI, 1987, p. 141.

Montage, composed of texts written largely between 1937 and 1940.⁴⁶ In these texts, Eisenstein explores the coexistence of what he calls “depiction” and the “generalizing image” across a stunning range of graphic forms. “I believe that it is in the existence of these two elements – the specific instance of depiction and the generalizing image which pervades it – that the implacability and the all-devouring force of artistic composition resides.”⁴⁷ In this formulation, we can perceive an articulation of the principle of caricature we described earlier as the direct production of an image of the general (the type) in the depiction of the most particular.

With the exception of a number of superficial statements in conformity with the prevailing ideology of Socialist Realism⁴⁸, the discussion of the “image” in *Montage* takes place largely at an ostensive remove from the debates of the time. Our second example (or counterexample) of the production of a type as an average—the Victorian Eugenicist Francis Galton’s invention of composite photography—involves traveling back to the 19th century.

⁴⁶ As the great Eisenstein scholar Naum Kleiman points out in a forward to the English translation of *Montage*, the text cannot be assimilated into the aesthetics of Socialist Realism: “Had it [*Montage*] been published at the end of the 30s, it could not have avoided accusations of Formalism. And no quotations or formulations, naïvely framing Eisenstein’s theoretical text, would have saved it.” Naum Kleiman, “On the Story of ‘Montage 1937,’” in SW2, xx.

⁴⁷ SW2 27.

⁴⁸ In addition to the humanist ode to “man” in the forward, there are what Geoffrey Nowell-Smith calls “some embarrassingly sycophantic remarks about Stanislavsky and a corresponding silence about Meyerhold.” Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, “Eisenstein on Montage,” SW2 xiii.

3.3.2 Galton's Composite Photography

If the old art of physiognomic caricature underwent a cultural resurgence during the 19th century in the context of social massification, when it came to the classification of populations it could hardly match the biopolitical utility of the new science of statistics. For Francis Galton, physiognomical classification would only ever rise to the level of positivistic knowledge exemplified in statistical analysis by purifying itself of the subjective distortions of caricature.

The physiognomical difference between different men being so numerous and small, it is impossible to measure and compare them each to each, and to discover by ordinary statistical methods the true physiognomy of a race. The usual way is to select individuals who are judged to be representative of the prevalent type, and to photo-graph them; but this method is not trustworthy, because the judgment itself is fallacious. It is swayed by exceptional and grotesque features more than by ordinary ones, and the portraits supposed to be typical are likely to be caricatures.⁴⁹

Galton staked the superiority of his new anthropometric technique of composite photography upon its capacity to overcome precisely this propensity for caricature by extracting the element of human judgment altogether. The key lay in devising a procedural automatism that matched the technical automatism of the photographic medium. Galton's procedure was to divide the total exposure time for a given composite by the number of facial images in the sample class of a given type (mugshots of "male

⁴⁹ Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (London: Macmillan, 1883), 342. Qtd. in Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive." *October* Vol. 39 (Winter 1986): 44.

criminals,” for example) out of which the composite was to be composed.⁵⁰ The result, he claimed, was nothing less than a new, “pictorial statistics,” the equivalent “of those large statistical tables whose totals, divided by the number of cases and entered on the bottom line, are the averages.”⁵¹ By uniting the iconic and indexical properties of photography with the statistical capacity for quantitative abstraction, Galton’s composites would visualize types as “*real generalizations*, because they include the whole of the material under consideration.”⁵² Even the characteristic blurring along the outline of these composites was claimed by Galton to increase their statistical precision by measuring “the tendency of individuals to deviate from the central type.”⁵³ Meantime, that “central type” is brought into focused solidity by the repeated exposures of overlapping features. Thus the most abstract level of representation, statistical average, is pictured as entirely concrete, while the deviating blurs register “but a ghost of a trace of individual peculiarities.”⁵⁴ Translated into the terms of Eisenstein’s concept of the “image” [*obraz*],

⁵⁰ For example, if the total exposure was to last ten seconds and there were ten images in the sample, then each image would get an exposure time of exactly one second. Jonathan Finn, *Capturing the Criminal Image: From Mug Shot to Surveillance Society*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 22.

⁵¹ Francis Galton, “On Generic Images,” in the *Proceedings of the Royal Institution*, vol.9 (1879): 166. Qtd. Sekula, 47.

⁵² Ibid. (Emphasis added.)

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty*, 7.

Galton's ideal of "real generalizations" expresses the dream of subsuming depiction into the line of generalization without a remainder—a fusion, that is, rather than a juncture of opposites.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Eisenstein should reference Galton's composite photography as a counter example for his conception of the image in *Montage*. This reference is nested within another: a passage Eisenstein quotes at length from Karl Bühler's *Theory of Speech* (1934) in which Bühler draws an analogy between Galton's compositing technique and the combination of ideas in metaphor. Eisenstein seizes upon the difference Bühler notes between the blurred outlines of the "Galton Picture" and the single, sharp image that binocular vision produces by combining two distinct retinal images in natural perception. The conclusion Eisenstein draws from this comparison is that, unlike the composite photograph, the result of binocular vision "is not a summarizing construct, but a truly *new entity*, with its own *new qualitative signification as an image*."⁵⁵

Galton's "summarizing construct" promises nothing less than a technological fix for the paradox of infinite types: to square the circle by simultaneously preserving and averaging nature's empirical multiplicity in the form of "real generalizations." His invention would bridge the gap between a regime of visual differentiation (the

⁵⁵ Eisenstein, "Unity in the Image," SW2, 274.

individuality of the mug shot) and a regime of visual topology (the generality of the composite portrait) by re-doubling the automatism of photography with second-order exposures of exposures. In actuality, that bridge is only accomplished by virtue of the transcendental taxonomy of quasi-natural types that organized the photographs of particular faces into Galton's sample sets to begin with. In this smuggling of a transcendental order into an ostensibly empirical demonstration we can discern a basic operation by which physiognomy is converted into an object of positivist knowledge and then set up in contradistinction to its newly disavowed other: physiognomy as caricature.

Eisenstein marks this same distinction in "Beyond the Shot" (1929)—but from the side of caricature—when he asserts that "[p]ositivist realism is by no means the correct form of perception" following an extended account of figural distortion as a graphic strategy across cultural forms. He describes, for example, the expressive force produced by the disproportionate representation of facial features in portraits by the great 18th century Japanese woodblock printmaker Tōshūsai Sharaku ("the Japanese Daumier"⁵⁶) and compares it to a cinematic montage of incongruous shot scales. In both cases, the effect is not simple distortion or discontinuity. Rather, the point is to subordinate the depictive elements of the representation to what Eisenstein calls (following Julius Kurth)

⁵⁶ SWI 141

a “*semantic purpose*,” to embody in the image itself a standpoint toward that which it represents. Whereas Galton links caricature to human judgment as proof of the latter’s faulty perception, Eisenstein makes this link into an active principle of *tendentious* composition. When he then turns to sharply criticize the demand for “actual (absolute) proportions” on the part of “positivist realism,” he sees its will to correct figural distortion as the function of a social structure that seeks to negate tendentiousness in general. As a demand for “subordination to the inviolable order of things,” the tendency

returns periodically and unfailingly in periods when absolutism is in the ascendancy, replacing the expressiveness of antiquated disproportions with a regular ‘ranking table’ of officially designated harmony.⁵⁷

This statement, aimed here against the anti-formalist tendencies mounting in official Soviet culture of 1929, could as easily be applied retrospectively to Galton’s idea of composite types as the modern corrective to the distortions of caricature or, for that matter, prospectively to the normative prescriptions of Socialist Realism for the impossible balance of heroic typicality.

What both of these doctrines share is an idealist commitment to the univocal relation between an essence and its phenomenal appearance. The consequence is a conception of form that is entirely static. This is a conception of form that cannot tolerate the distortions of a standpoint embodied in the form itself, not least because it threatens

⁵⁷ SW1 142.

to reverse the direction of “expressive causality” (Althusser) and by so doing redound upon and disturb the underlying order.

3.4 Dynamic Typicality

In the era of pars pro toto in the 19th century arises also the ‘miracle’ of deducing an animal from a jaw-bone.⁵⁸

— Eisenstein, Notes for a *General History of Cinema*

We can further clarify the distinction between the understanding of form in the counterexamples of typing above and Eisenstein’s idea of typicality as plastic form with an analogy from the history of evolutionary biology concerning the status of natural selection. As historians of science have long demonstrated, Darwin’s great innovation was not the discovery of natural selection *per se*. The reality of natural selection as an operative principle was widely accepted within pre-Darwinian biological discourse. The difference is that it was folded into an overriding commitment to created permanency. In this capacity, natural selection served a purely negative function. It “acted only to preserve the type, constant and inviolate,” as Stephen Jay Gould puts it, “by eliminating extreme variants and unfit individuals who threatened to degrade the essence of created form.”⁵⁹ If natural selection served to clarify the ideal type by pruning its unfit accidents

⁵⁸ Naum Kleiman and Antonio Somaini, eds., *Sergei M. Eisenstein: Notes for a General History of Cinema* (Amsterdam University Press, 2013), in press.

⁵⁹ Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 139.

of expression, the type itself was understood to pre-exist all such accidents, its essential fitness to originate in an altogether different, positive source. Darwin's genius was to invert this common understanding of natural selection as the mechanism for preserving the type by making it the primary cause of evolutionary change. The raw material of variation is a field of pure contingency that only becomes necessity by virtue of natural selection.

We can say that Galton's project of composite photography posits an essentially pre-Darwinian understanding of natural types as forms that transcend the variety of their expressions.⁶⁰ Composite photography is then an analytical tool for carrying out the work clarifying pre-existing types that was imputed to natural selection. Of course, this ceases to be merely an analogy insofar as that is more or less how Galton *did* view the uses of his composite photography for a eugenics that drew upon Mendelian genetics and its theory of inheritance.⁶¹ As an analytical tool, composite photography could participate in the effort to literally replace the function of natural selection with a program of socially engineered biological selection.

⁶⁰ In 1900 Jacob Cooper published in *The Methodist Review* an essay entitled "The Platonic Idea Elucidated by the Composite Photograph," arguing that Galton's invention gave "support to the system of revealed religion" and refuted Darwin's theories.

⁶¹ See: Jonathan M Finn, *Capturing the Criminal Image: From Mug Shot to Surveillance Society* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 17–23.

To draw the analogy from the Darwin side, we can say that Eisenstein's approach to form follows the same basic inversion of the accepted priority between a type and its expressions (or essence and its appearances) as the Darwinian conception of natural selection. We have already seen how Eisenstein's conception of typicality involves the making necessary of contingency. Here we can see how that operation can function as a motor of dynamic change.

3.4.1 Physiognomy as Self-generalizing Form

The idea of inverting the causal order of essence and appearance was extremely appealing to Eisenstein. Evidence of that appeal can be seen, for example, in his embrace of various motor theories of cognition and emotion for his theory of attractions. Among the most influential proponents of these theories in the early twentieth century was William James. And in a very late essay written in same period as the *Notes*, Eisenstein recalls that during his time in the Proletkult theater he was "already aware of James's famous formula that 'we are not crying because we are sad; but we are sad because we are crying.' I liked that formula first of all aesthetically, for its paradoxical quality."⁶² Eisenstein's description here of his affinity for this Jamesian inversion, brings us back once again to the paradox of infinite types in which the selection of a particular face produces the type it is meant to express.

⁶² Eisenstein, "How I Became a Director" [1945], *SW3* p. 286.

To see how Eisenstein puts this inversion to work with respect to type, we will now consider his transformative appropriation of the tradition of physiognomy—a discourse that focalizes the expression of essence in the outward appearance in the face. In his speech to the All-Union Creative Conference of Soviet Filmworkers in 1935, Eisenstein combines an explicit rejection of the scientific validity of Lavater's physiognomy with an affirmation of its artistic power. "We do not ascribe any scientific value to it objectively, and yet the moment we have to show a typical characterization of external appearance on a par with a three-dimensional depiction of the character, we start using faces in the same way as Lavater did."⁶³ The discredited science of physiognomy can remerge in art "where it is needed as an image," as Eisenstein puts it, because the falsity of physiognomy as a science lay in its positing a univocal relation between essence and appearance. Once that relation is severed, appearance becomes autonomous and form primary.

In *Montage*, Eisenstein describes more precisely how it is possible to appropriate physiognomy in this way. The reason a "three-dimensional depiction" of a character can be accomplished with the sort of frozen face epitomized in Lavater's silhouettes is that an entire history of expression and mimicry *appears* to be congealed there:

People generally like to make a 'figurative' connection between mimicry and physiognomy. A person's physiognomy generalizes, as it were, those

⁶³ SW3 27

mimetic features which are most peculiar to him. His habitual movements seem to be frozen in the permanent *character mask* of his face.⁶⁴

It is crucial, however, not to interpret this passage as a naturalistic description.

3.4.2 Typicality of the Event

Eisenstein's rejection of naturalist representation has its counterpart in his irreverence towards positivist representations of history. On this point, he is unequivocal: when there is a conflict between "factual truth" and "artistic truth" it must be "resolved in favour of the artistic image at the cost of divergence from factual accuracy."⁶⁵ But this is not to pit fiction against history. To the contrary, for Eisenstein it is only through this embrace of a fictional supplement that a realistic, which is to say, dynamic, rendering of an historical situation is possible. Indeed, it is precisely this dynamic orientation that Eisenstein accuses Vertov of cancelling out for the sake of "the statics of a manifest pantheism" (as Eisenstein derisively calls the *Kino-Eye* program).⁶⁶ Playing upon and against Vertov's dismissive description of his (Eisenstein's) method as "'factual' play (illusion)" as well Vertov's self-description of *Kino-Pravda* as "the film of

⁶⁴ SW2 36.

⁶⁵ SW2 51

⁶⁶ SW1 63

fact,” Eisenstein posits a dynamic construction he calls [p]lay with facts (montage of visible events). The creation of a new world.”⁶⁷

Eisenstein always insisted that there is a typicality of events portrayed in film as well as of faces. We can think, for example, of the famous scene in *Potemkin* where the sailors refuse orders to fire upon a group of their comrades who have been covered with a canvas tarpaulin. This powerful image of covering the condemned *en masse*, a device which simultaneously unifies and shrouds the sailors from their would-be executioners, was a complete fabrication: “At naval executions by firing squad no one was ever, on any occasion, covered by anything—not on the *Potemkin*, or on any other vessel of the tsarist navy.” Eisenstein supposedly arrived at this invention by transforming a minor historical detail—the fact that tarpaulins *were* used in naval executions, not over the heads of the victims but under their feet, to protect the ship’s deck from bloodstains—into a fictional device that effectively concentrates the entire situation into a single image. Even for those spectators in a position to know the facts, ex-sailors of the Tsarist navy, the “effect of this image was more significant and decisive than a documentarily accurate but artistically meaningless factual account of the procedure.”⁶⁸ With the right fictional image, a lowly tarp achieves typicality.

⁶⁷ EC 16

⁶⁸ SW2, 51.

By the same token, historical accuracy is no guarantee of typicality. A fact, even an especially vivid or significant one, can fail the test of typage. Eisenstein points to an example of such a failure from *The General Line*. It occurs during the first part of film, which is dedicated to demonstrating the “backward” ways of the old peasantry. In order to illustrate an illogical devotion to the principle of private property, he draws upon the practice (which he claims to have discovered in the Peza province) of dividing property by literally sawing peasant cottages in half beam by beam. The image of two brothers sawing their inheritance in half is “a fact, a ‘super-factual’ fact” at the same time that it functions as a vivid illustration of “the property-owning instinct carried to the point of total absurdity.”⁶⁹ And yet, the very vividness of this image accounts for its failure to achieve the effect Eisenstein intended:

[I]t did not occur to us in our quest for vividness to notice that this scene and this image were *so* remote from the patterns of thought familiar to us (as remote as the atavism of the practice itself is from our age!) that they diverged from ‘typicality’ completely and simply could not be structured into the image we required.⁷⁰

Consequently, the audience felt the scene was inauthentic or contrived. While “[t]he reaction of others was worse still: they thought the scene was a made-up allegory.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ SW2 151.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

For Eisenstein, being read as an allegory truly is the worst fate that can befall a typage construction. By reinstalling the primacy of essence over form, allegory threatens to undo the work of making typical performed, for example, in his idea of a literal or reverse metaphor.

3.5 Animal Typicality in Strike

The 'form' of an animal — evolutionarily a step backwards in relation to 'content' — to man! ... Compare Totemism and Darwinism — descent from animals.

— Eisenstein, “The Animal Epos” in *On Disney*⁷²

“As soon as I crossed over into cinema,” Eisenstein recalls to his students at the State Institute for Cinema, “I threw myself into typage.”⁷³ And , indeed, his first film *Strike* (1925) is not only populated by types; its entire construction is a form of typage. As commentators have long noted, the six-part structure of *Strike*’s plot “schematizes the typical stages, tests and crises through which a strike must pass” and in so doing organizes itself as a kind of manual or guidebook.⁷⁴ Undertaken in what Eisenstein calls “the ‘how to make’ a revolution mode,” *Strike* follows *The Communist Manifesto* to the letter in its designation of the parts the bourgeoisie, the workers, and the

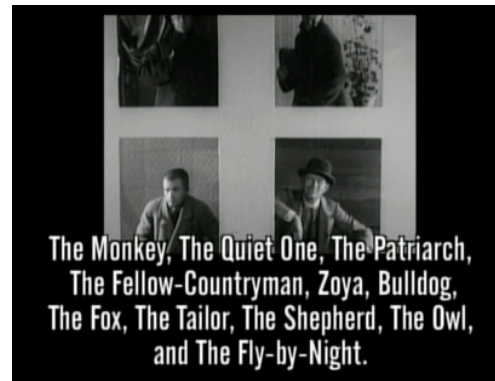
⁷² Sergei Eisenstein, *The Eisenstein Collection* (London; New York: Seagull Books, 2006), 133.

⁷³ SW3, 11.

⁷⁴ Bordwell, 52.

lumpenproletariat play within the class struggle.⁷⁵ Each of these classes receives its own typage treatment from Eisenstein. In this section, we will consider a sequence in which the criminal members of the lumpenproletariat are introduced to perform their role in the class struggle as “a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.”⁷⁶

Tasked with infiltrating the factory district, an official of the secret police examines a photo catalogue of private agents. As a page of this catalogue appears in full screen with four portraits mounted in the style of a “rogue’s gallery,” the officer’s hand enters the frame and taps each portrait in turn with a pencil. This gesture serves like a magician’s pledge to demonstrate for the audience that this is indeed an ordinary sheet of still photographs [figure 3]. The “turn” happens after an intertitle assigns animal



⁷⁵ Eisenstein, *Notes*, TEXT 6, p. 1.

⁷⁶ *The Communist Manifesto*, 482.



Figure 3: The Literal Animism of the “Rogues Gallery” in *Strike*

monikers to the figures pictured there—The Monkey, Bulldog, The Fox, The Owl—when the film cuts back and these portraits burst into motion, their faces miming manic expressions as their heads and torsos jut forward and side-to-side, breaking both the flat plane of the page and the rectangular frames of their photographs [figure 3]. After crawling out of the rogue’s gallery, two of the private agents materialize via a shot/reverse shot of the delighted face of the Secret Police officer to stand life size in the room before him.

Eisenstein delights throughout *Strike* in the use of intertitles to literalize visual metaphors—we can think, for example, of the scene when the factory director kicks his chair off of a balcony in disgust followed by the line, “Their thrones rest on the labor of the workers,” or when ink spelled over a map of the factory district is followed by, “the streets running with blood.” We can read the animation of the agents in the rogue’s gallery as a kind of ultimate literalizing of metaphor—the animal totems acting as a catalyst for the animist transformation from still photograph to moving image.

In the sequence immediately following, *Strike* extends this literalized metaphor through a series of lap dissolves that superimpose medium close-ups of human faces over shots of animals. The quasi-diegetic motivation for this sequence is Bulldog's visit to a pet shop directly following his materialization in the secret police office. Arranged by an establishing shot into the tableau of a bestiary, the pet shop displays live incarnations of all the animals used as totems for the agents. Each is signaled out in its turn by the camera and fused with its human analogue. First we see the face of a fox dissolve into the face of a young man with foxlike features. [see Figure 4] After an intertitle repeats his moniker, we see "The Fox" in a room busily disguising himself as a blind beggar in order to eavesdrop on the workers as they meet in the street to organize. The pattern repeats for "The Owl," who rouses himself from bed and perches on a roof overlooking a workers' meeting place, "The Monkey," who poses as a peddler of shaved ice and approaches a group of workers conspiring on a sidewalk curb, and, finally, "The Bulldog" himself, whose purpose for visiting the pet shop is revealed, at the end of the sequence, as procuring a performing bear to serve as his own pretext for mingling among the workers.

On the level of *Strike's* pedagogical function, then, the bestiary sequence serves the purpose of illustrating techniques the secret police use for gathering intelligence on



Figure 4: Superimposition of Animal Types in *Strike*

workers. In this case, hiring spies to pose as indigents, peddlers or street performers in order to gain an unobtrusive proximity to workers who gather in public outside the factory walls. Indeed, Eisenstein claimed to have culled the archives of the czarist secret police for animal nicknames given to actual informants. Taken together, the elements of the bestiary sequence constitute a concrete instance very early in Eisenstein's filmmaking where the two scales at which typicality is meant to operate—the scale of individual characters and the scale of the plot as a whole—coincide. That is, by identifying a character with a single behavioral trait the animal typing of the agents affords an economy of recognition in service of the larger typicality of the plot. Once

established as the bearer of a single trait, these characters can be readily traced forward through *Strike's* schematization of a strike in general.

At the same time, this sequence of animal typing also exceeds the function assigned to it by the typicality of *Strike's* pedagogical structure. To begin with, it is worth noting that the bestiary sequence makes recourse to one of the oldest representational strategies of physiognomy and caricature alike—the morphological comparison of humans and animals. Zoological physiognomics has a pedigree in Western thought traceable to the very origins of physiognomy as a pseudoscience in fifth century B.C. Already in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle mentions the technique of a physiognomist who reads human faces according to the purported simpler structure of two or three basic animals. This zoological strain reaches an aesthetic highpoint in the Cartesianism of Charles Le Brun's *Conférence sur l'expression générale et particulière* (1698).

In terms of Eisenstein's formation and later interests, we can place the animal typepage in *Strike* in a series that includes: his own childhood drawings, "In the World of Animals" [see Figure 5]; his lifelong fondness for the animal epos and the caricatures of Grandville; and his late notes on Disney's animations. In those notes, Eisenstein returns to his idea of the literalized metaphor, linking it this time to Disney's animations and what he considers a distinguishing capacity to reverse anthropomorphism as



Figure 5: Eisenstein's "In the World of Animals," Riga 1913-14⁷⁷

"zoopromorphism." The attraction of Disney's *Bambi* is not so much that she is a "humanized deer" but "*Rückgänglich* [conversely] a 'redeerized' human."⁷⁸ The point is not to metaphorically transfer the qualities of the animal onto the human put to produce a kind of identity through regression. In this regard, the bestiary sequence bears comparison to that other of humans and animals in *Strike*: the famous abattoir sequence at the end of the film, in which close-up footage of the slaughter of a live bull is intercut

⁷⁷ Reprinted in *The Eisenstein Collection*, 185.

⁷⁸ {Citation}



Figure 6: Grandville's "*Le loup et le chien*"⁷⁹

with a staged scene in long-shot of striking workers gunned down *en masse*. In the final section of this chapter, we will consider the reasons for what Eisenstein calls the “hilarious failure” of that scene when he screened *Strike* for a worker’s audience. For the moment, however, I would simply mark the formal difference between the cross-cutting of the abattoir sequence and the use of superimposition in the bestiary sequence. In the latter, at the midpoint of the lap dissolve, both images are equally exposed and the features of animal and human combine in a single heterogenous ensemble. As we will see in the following section, Eisenstein conceived of the technique of superimposition itself in terms of a (reversible) genetic progression from animal to human.

⁷⁹ http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grandville_leLoup_Et_Le_Chien.jpg

3.5.1 Superimposition

Eisenstein composed a short, occasional essay on the technique of superimposition entitled “Georges Méliès’s Mistake” (1933) as the preface for a book by Vladimir Nilsen on trick photography. He uses his meditation upon this ostensibly narrow topic to present for the first time his concept of the “basic phenomenon of cinema.” He begins the essay by likening the storied origin of superimposition—Georges Méliès’s “mistake” of double exposing a strip of film—to the mistaken coupling of a horse with a donkey that produced the first mule. Just as the mule endured because it happened to meet the economic needs of the social structure, the “mistake” of superimposition became part of cinema’s visual repertoire because of its expressive relation to the “structure of our process of perception in general.”⁸⁰

Thus, Eisenstein tells this moment in the history of cinema as the story of a contingency (the “accidental” invention of superimposition) becoming necessary. As we’ve already observed, this dialectic of contingency and necessity assumes its most general expression in the *Notes* with Eisenstein’s discussion of *pars pro toto* and the leap of “synecdochalization” whereby the detail becomes typical in the strong sense of a non-substitutable substitute for the whole. We can now begin to appreciate how the

⁸⁰ SW1 258.

superimposed image appears as an especially privileged synecdoche in Eisenstein's theory of cinema's history. On one level, superimposition is simply one technical device among others, catalogued under "special effects" in the *Notes*. On a higher level, however, it is nothing less than the basis for the *Urphänomen* of film, the theory of which Eisenstein began to develop in "Beyond the Shot" and developed much more elaborately in *Montage*.

In *Montage*, Eisenstein observes that the "depiction of phylogenesis inevitably summons up an autogenetic image,"⁸¹ This little essay on superimposition, written several years earlier, provides a stunning description of just such an image. This is a variation upon the conquering of the vertical posture that appears elsewhere in his writing. "The animal, as it climbed up the evolutionary ladder, straightened out its spine and stood up on two legs in the vertical position."⁸² Here the evolution of human perception is depicted with an autogenetic image of facial morphology:

The eyes of a fish stare motionless to the side in diametrically opposite directions. Since its two fields of vision never cross, a fish is deprived of the opportunity of perceiving space stereoscopically. It would have to pick its way painfully through the scale of the evolution of species so that, when it reached the half-way stage of the ape on its way towards mankind, its eyes would move from the side of its head to join in the middle of its snout and form a face.⁸³

⁸¹ SW2, 49.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ SW1 258.

In this remarkable description, conquering the stereoscopic perception of reality is to grow a face. For Eisenstein, superimposition is the counterpart, on the side of the image, to this same phylogenetic process.

As we can see, the method of superimposing one image upon another is like a copy of all the progressive stages in a single historical process towards the assimilation and realization of reality.⁸⁴

This synecdochal elevation of superimposition helps to clarify what it means more generally for Eisenstein to claim in the *Notes* that cinema “is a copy of man’s psychological apparatus.” As opposed to stereoscopic cinema, a superimposed image does not “copy” the apparatus of binocular vision by directly reproducing the three-dimensionality of natural perception. An image of superimposition bears the same relation to stereoscopic cinema, as a multiphase drawing does to the cinematic illusion of movement:

It is interesting that, when we resort to the graphic method of fixing a three-dimensional phenomenon, to graphic representation that inevitably gives way to the fullness of speculative representation, human practice is forced to slip back into the deconstruction of a three-dimensional body into two flat images.⁸⁵

The operation of typicality is precisely to break from natural perception but to make a break that is based on the underlying organic structure of that perception.

⁸⁴ SW1 260.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 259.

3.6 Mimesis and The Politics of Form

3.6.1 Eisenstein and Balázs at La Sarraz

*We have to create new forms because we need them. That is the difference between our avant-garde and the other.*⁸⁶

— Eisenstein, “Imitation as Mastery”

Eisenstein made this declaration in the name of Soviet filmmaking before an unparalleled collection of European avant-garde filmmakers and critics. The occasion was the Congress of Independent Filmmakers held in September 1929 at the chateau of La Sarraz in Switzerland, a meeting that included the likes of Hans Richter, Walter Ruttmann, Raymond Aron, Léon Moussinac, Alberto Cavalcanti, and Ivor Montagu.⁸⁷ Eisenstein was at the beginning of his nearly three-year-long trip abroad that would take him (along with his cameraman Eduard Tisse and assistant Grigori Alexandrov) to Europe, the United States, Hollywood, and ultimately Mexico to film the ill-fated *Qué Viva Mexico!*, before he was finally and forcefully summoned home under direct pressure from Stalin. Having departed the Soviet Union for this trip just as the attack on formalism was consolidating itself in the institutions of official Soviet culture,⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Sergei Eisenstein, “Imitation as Mastery” in *The Eisenstein Collection*. Ed. Richard Taylor (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2006), 16.

⁸⁷ On the centrality of La Sarraz for the interwar European avant-garde see Malte Hagener, *Moving forward, looking back : the European avant-garde and the invention of film culture, 1919-1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 144-47.

⁸⁸ Most importantly in The Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) with its successful campaign in 1929 against the Russian Formalist School.

Eisenstein now found himself at La Sarraz in a milieu of filmmakers and critics who had assembled precisely to affirm formal experimentation.

For their part, the Europeans at La Sarraz seemed unsure what to make of the three Soviets. The British screenwriter and critic Ivor Montagu would later describe the appearance of Eisenstein, Tisse, and Alexandrov as a kind of violent “irruption” in the predictable discussions of the Congress. Dressed in matching blue suits, they arrived like a contingent of aliens “not exactly from outer space but from its then spiritual equivalent, the U.S.S.R.”⁸⁹ Eisenstein’s films, especially *Potemkin*, were by then well-known in Europe and for many of the participants at La Sarraz the Soviets had achieved a legendary status. Another one of Montagu’s remarks captures something of the political ambiguity of the situation in which Eisenstein and his companions found themselves: “Were they not our heroes? We were not ‘Reds’ – the epithet was little used then – but we adored experiment.”⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Ivor Montagu, *With Eisenstein in Hollywood: A Chapter of Autobiography* by Ivor Montagu (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 13. Montagu would later travel with Eisenstein to Hollywood and collaborate with him on scenarios for film adaptations of *Sutter’s Gold* and *An American Tragedy*.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15. Montagu’s remark here also points to the political tensions in European avant-garde filmmaking at this juncture. In the year after La Sarraz, the League of Independent Cinema which was founded there was dissolved to create a new organization called the *Association des artistes et écrivains révolutionnaires* (AEAR), with the explicit goal of resisting fascism in Europe. See Hagener, *Moving forward, looking back*, 146-7.

What this circumstance required from Eisenstein, then, was not the affirmation of formalism *per se* so much as the assertion of a necessary dialectic between artistic invention and revolutionary social change. “Only new forms can elicit new *questions*. And new questions can only throw up a new social system. And that,” he added, “is the role of Soviet film in film culture.”⁹¹ But what precisely Eisenstein means here by *form* is a complex question, not least because he begins the lecture with an assault on the primacy of form as the basis for mimesis. He dismisses as magical thinking the age-old impulse to achieve mastery over things through the mimetic representations of their visible form. Such is the “cannibalism” that defines art—from Greek mythology of Saturn devouring his children to the Indian god Brahma swallowing his own sperm—as the search for immortality through the consumption of one’s likeness. Eisenstein nevertheless upholds the supremacy of mimesis (or “imitation”) as the path to mastery by positing an imitation of “principle” to displace that of form. In every field of human endeavor, from science to history, economics to art:

The age of form is drawing to a close.

We are penetrating matter. We are penetrating behind appearance into the principle of appearance.

⁹¹ Eisenstein, “Imitation as Mastery,” 16.

In doing so we are mastering it.⁹²

Some critics have interpreted the La Sarraz lecture as a defense of abstract film delivered in the spirit of the occasion, if not quite in conformity with it.⁹³ Whether it was actually received as a validation of their aesthetic commitments by the congress members who were by and large either practitioners or acolytes of abstract film is unclear.⁹⁴ What is clear, however, is that at least one person present at La Sarraz did understand it in precisely these terms—an “old theoretician, exile from his Hungarian homeland,”⁹⁵ Béla Balázs—whose hostility toward *avant garde* film was undisguised.⁹⁶ When Balázs published *The Spirit of Film* (1930) the following year, he used Eisenstein’s La Sarraz

⁹² Ibid., 14.

⁹³ For example, in the portion of her biography of Eisenstein devoted to his La Sarraz lecture, Oksana Bulgakowa claims that “[a]mong the crowd at La Sarraz, Eisenstein’s defense of abstract film sounded like a diplomatic maneuver,” but does not substantiate that claim with reference to any contemporaneous accounts. Oksana Bulgakowa, *Sergei Eisenstein: A Biography*. Trans. Anne Dwyer (Berlin: Potemkin Press, 2001), 96.

⁹⁴ Nor is it even clear precisely what version of the lecture Eisenstein gave at La Sarraz. On the text’s discovery and reconstruction by Naum Kleiman, see Richard Taylor, “Introduction: Eisenstein at La Sarraz” in *Rediscovering Eisenstein* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁹⁵ This is Ivor Montagu’s brief description of Balázs at La Sarraz in *With Eisenstein in Hollywood*, 14.

⁹⁶ In *The Storming of La Sarraz*, the impromptu short film (since lost) made by the participants at the congress as an allegory of the battle between independent and commercial cinema, Balázs played the Commander of the Army of the Commercial Cinema who holds the Spirit of the Artistic Film (played by Janine Boussounouse) captive in a castle for his boss, the film tycoon Bluebeard (played by Jacob Isaacs). Eisenstein, in the role of Don Quixote, fights on the side of the Army of the Independents who storm the castle and free her. Ronald Bergan, *Eisenstein: A Life in Conflict* (New York: The Overlook Press, 1999), 159.

lecture to exemplify the problem at the core of what he criticized as the “Ideology of Absolute and Abstract Films.” His critique of the lecture is worth quoting at length because it perfectly crystallizes a fundamental difference between Balázs and Eisenstein on the question of form. Having first presented a general indictment of abstract film as providing the petty bourgeois sensibilities of its audience with an “aesthetic escape from the obligations of reality,” Balázs turns directly to Eisenstein’s lecture:

At [a recent] Congress for Independent Filmmakers in La Sarraz, Eisenstein offered an ingenious defense of the abstract film’s dissolution of phenomenal forms. He asserted that what mattered was not the imitation of form but the representation of the underlying essence. It would be a kind of cannibalism to imagine that by devouring the form of a phenomenon we might also consume its essence. ... If Eisenstein were not such a hopelessly Kantian dualist, he would not think this psychophagy cannibalistic. For no phenomenon has an accidental form. It is shaped by its essence. It is the *sole* phenomenal form of this essence and therefore, for the visual experience, it is the essence itself. The phenomenon must not be dissolved and abstracted, but *given a physiognomy* so that its essence may become manifest. For that essence cannot be made to emerge on its own.⁹⁷

Balázs offers a concise statement of his own position in this critique, which does indeed differ fundamentally from Eisenstein’s, though not for reasons he names. As we’ve seen, “physiognomy” is Balázs’s master term for cinema’s capacity to disclose (human) essence. The cinematic form that discloses essence most potently—the human face in close-up—is his model for the medium of cinema itself, and the deep

⁹⁷ Béla Balázs, *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory. Visible Man and The Spirit of Film*. Ed. Erica Carter; Trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York and Oxford: Berghan Books, 2010), 227.

anthropomorphism of this model lies in Balázs's elevation of physiognomic vision to a transcendental category of human perception.⁹⁸ For Balázs, the cinematic image is *a priori* physiognomic; whatever else one sees on screen, at bottom, one sees *seeing* in the form of its own condition of possibility. As I've argued, this desire in Balázs's theory for the direct appearance of a transcendental condition in an empirical form is achieved at the cost of a static relation between form (however mutable in itself) and the essence it would manifest. We can observe a similar dynamic at work here in his critique of Eisenstein's La Sarraz lecture. Balázs's insistence on the preservation of phenomenal appearance (by which he means something like concrete representational form) against abstraction is grounded in the claim that form bears a necessary and fixed relation to essence. "[E]ssence cannot be made to emerge on its own," as he puts it, not simply because it requires the midwifery of *some* form in order to appear in the world, but because any particular form is determined by the essence that shapes it. Although Balázs's statement that essence cannot "emerge on its own" would seem to make essence contingent upon the historical appearance of forms, his logic effectively evacuates historical contingency by making form the univocal expression of essence.

If we accept this reading of Balázs as an unwitting Platonist despite himself, what then do we make of Balázs's accusation of Eisenstein's Platonism in his account of

⁹⁸ In *Visible Man*, Balázs writes: "Just time and space are categories of our understanding, and can thus never be eliminated from the world of our experience, so too the physiognomical attaches to every phenomenon. It is a necessary category of our perception." *Early Film Theory*, 56.

the La Sarraz lecture as a defense of the “dissolution of phenomenal forms” in the name of “underlying essence”?⁹⁹ To begin with, Eisenstein’s conception of a “principle” does not assume the status of an essence strictly opposed to form. As Eisenstein tells the Soviet critics of *Strike* in 1925, the true opposite of form is *formlessness*.¹⁰⁰ His valorization of the imitation of principle over that of form is not to be understood as a Platonic gesture to abolish aesthetic form altogether. Rather, it is a question of putting form on a new footing, one no longer based on semblance. In an example from modern architecture, Eisenstein compares the imitation of the external forms of nature found in the “dreadful” designs of *art nouveau* to a Le Corbusier building, which refuses to “ape the proportions” of the human body and instead grasps the inner logic of its structure and needs. Film progresses along analogous lines once the centrality of the individual actor as the focal point of emotional imitation gives way to the mass as protagonist (i.e. in *Strike*, *Battleship Potemkin*, and *October*) and form is put in service of the principle underlying history itself (class struggle). “But film cannot stand still either.”¹⁰¹ The

⁹⁹ Balázs is not alone in this assessment. Oksana Bulgakowa describes the lecture as developing a “Platonic opposition between appearance and inner essence.” *Eisenstein: A Biography*, p. 96. But among contemporary Eisenstein scholars, it is Mikhail Iampolski who has probably gone the furthest in this direction by situating not just “Imitation as Mastery” but the entire orientation of Eisenstein’s thought within a Platonic framework. See “Chapter Seven: The Invisible Text as a Universal Equivalent” in his *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film*.

¹⁰⁰ “[P]eople are ready to trample with such fanaticism on any work in the field of form, branding it as ‘Formalism’ and preferring . . . complete formlessness.” [ellipsis in the original] SW1 59.

¹⁰¹ Eisenstein, “Imitation as Mastery,” 15.

depiction of revolutionary struggle must give way in its turn to the attempt to impart the (post)revolutionary energy of pathos to everyday life (i.e. in *The General Line*) and to imitate the principle upon which to build a new society (collectivization). It is in view of this understanding of the imitation of principle as the engine of ever new formal arrangements that we must see Eisenstein's declaration at the end of the lecture that "[w]e have to create new forms because we *need* them."¹⁰²

There is no question that Balázs and Eisenstein shared a political commitment to the future of communism. No doubt, both agreed with Lenin's statement that "of all the arts, for us cinema is the most important."¹⁰³ Nor is there even a question that Eisenstein shared Balázs's assessment of the *l'art pour l'art* dimension of abstract film as essentially counter-revolutionary.¹⁰⁴ The difference between them does not appear on the terrain of politics *per se* but over the question of what Eisenstein will call "artistic thought." But that difference does have political implications beyond the context in which the two found themselves. We will turn now to a far more famous polemic between Eisenstein

¹⁰² Ibid., 16.

¹⁰³ This statement was famously attributed to Lenin by Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first Soviet People's Commissar of Enlightenment responsible for culture and education.

¹⁰⁴ In 1926, Eisenstein wrote that the "independent use" of attractions "leads to *l'art pour l'art* whose counter-revolutionary essence is obvious enough." "The Method of Making a Workers' Film," SW1 65. And in "Béla Forgets the Scissors" itself, Eisenstein derided the work of Picabia, Léger, and Chomette as "children's playthings." SW1 77.

and Balázs in order to see how this difference is worked out over the question of cinematic movement.

3.6.2 Beyond Forgotten Scissors: Cinematic Movement

Between the appearance of *Visible Man* and *The Spirit of Film* Balázs published a short article in *Kinogazeta* titled “The Future of Film” (1926). In keeping with his earlier theoretical pronouncements, Balázs locates the essence of film art in the expressive capacity of cinematography and, for the purposes of this article, uses this position to elevate the camera operator to the status of an author/poet/painter. For Balázs this means privileging the shot as the essential element of cinematic art—the shot apprehended not, however, in the aspect of its own “static” composition (or “decorative charm”) but rather as a kind of vessel of vital *durée*, what he calls “the general rhythm of the passing events of real life.”¹⁰⁵ For his example Balázs turns to a shot from *Battleship Potemkin* of a small fleet of skiffs sailing out from Odessa to bring provisions to the mutinous sailors anchored offshore. Crowded full of billowing sails, Balázs sees in this shot the image of a collective face, a “unity of mimic expression”¹⁰⁶ conveying pure revolutionary enthusiasm. In a word, Balázs praises this shot for its “physiognomy,” an

¹⁰⁵ Béla Balázs, “The Future of Film” in *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*. Ed. and Trans. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 144.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 145.

effect that would be profoundly disrupted, on his view, had it instead been broken up into multiple shots.

Balázs's admiration in this article for Eisenstein's work was, to say the least, unrequited. Just two weeks later, Eisenstein published a famous response in *Kino* entitled "Béla Forgets the Scissors" in which he more or less savages Balázs together with the entire German film industry. This polemic remains one of the great landmarks in the terrain of classical film theory. In textbook summaries, it is usually glossed as an argument over what constitutes cinema's minimal unit of articulation—the shot or montage (defined narrowly as editing). And Eisenstein does seem to substantiate this reading when, for example, in a somewhat strained analogy between the purportedly "individualistic" ideology of the German film industry and Balázs's stress on the "*individualized shot*," he insists that "[w]e must look for the essence of cinema not in the shots but in the relationships between the shots just as in history we look not at individuals but at the relationships between individuals, classes, etc."¹⁰⁷ But such a statement should already put us on guard merely by the fact that Eisenstein invokes an "essence" of cinema, precisely the kind of language and approach that is anathema to the prevailing tendencies of his thought (outside of a few polemical occasions). And, indeed, even within the space of this short article, Eisenstein modifies the external

¹⁰⁷ Eisenstein, "Béla Forgets the Scissors," SW1, 79.

opposition between shot and montage through the idea of a “genetic” link between shots. This is an early iteration of the organic conception of montage he elaborates fully several years later in “Beyond the Shot” (1929) with his account of a developmental (or embryonic) relation between shot and montage. As for the theoretical implication of his insistence in that essay that the shot is, contra Kuleshov, a “montage cell” not a “montage element,” Eisenstein is unequivocal: it means there can be no “distinguishing in principle between montage and what happens within the shot.”¹⁰⁸ And a decade on Eisenstein alludes to (and perhaps even softens) his own earlier attack on Balázs by suggesting that montage had been generally privileged as a theoretical object at the expense of the shot simply because its “means of production and analysis were more accessible: a pair of scissors and a ruler.”¹⁰⁹ Once we move past a superficial reading of Eisenstein’s polemic with Balázs as about the priority of editing over the shot, what emerges is a far more profound and, for our purposes, productive difference between the two theorists. This difference turns on the question of medium specificity and its relation to cinematic movement.

Like Rudolph Arnheim and virtually all the major figures of classical film theory, Balázs was at pains to differentiate cinema from the other arts—especially theater and

¹⁰⁸ Eisenstein, “Beyond the Shot,” SW1, 144, 149.

¹⁰⁹ Eisenstein, “Montage 1937,” SW2, 12.

literature, toward which it bore a special anxiety of influence. Eisenstein was the great exception to this tendency. In his writings, all arts are potentially comparable to cinema because the most fundamental questions for Eisenstein concern method not medium. To cite just two of the more famous examples, we can recall his claim that the cinematic principle of montage saturates every level of Japanese representational culture (except its cinema) or his insistence that the close-up was invented by Charles Dickens before D.W. Griffith appropriated it for the screen.¹¹⁰ “[T]he difference of ‘technology’ is irrelevant,” he writes while comparing the techniques of painting and cinematography, the “decisive factor” is “*artistic thinking*.”¹¹¹ Whatever other changes his thought underwent, Eisenstein held to this position with remarkable consistency.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Balázs pursues his argument for cinema’s medium specificity along the canonical lines established in German aesthetics by G. E. Lessing’s *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766). While this reference remains tacit (if pervasive) in Balázs, Eisenstein makes explicit and extensive use of Lessing, rather audaciously naming the longest chapter of his book *Montage* “Laocoön.” In contrast to Balázs, Eisenstein uses Lessing as a way to traverse medium specificities.

¹¹⁰ SW1, 150.

¹¹¹ Eisenstein, “Yermolova” (SW2), 83.

Eisenstein goes directly to the object of Lessing's quarrel with Winckelmann, the Laocoön Group sculpture and, not incidentally for our purposes, he focuses on the face of its central figure. He concentrates on the method for depicting the expression of pain on Laocoön's face at the point, just as the serpent is about to devour him together with his two sons (Lessing's famous "pregnant moment"). It is, for Eisenstein, a potent example of the "cinematic" method of producing an illusion of movement through the simultaneous depiction of muscle contractions that cannot coincide naturally. The storied force of this sculpted face depends upon a "physically impossible facial expression." Eisenstein takes this latter observation directly from the findings of experimental physiology, specifically the work of the French neurologist G.B. Duchenne whose 1876

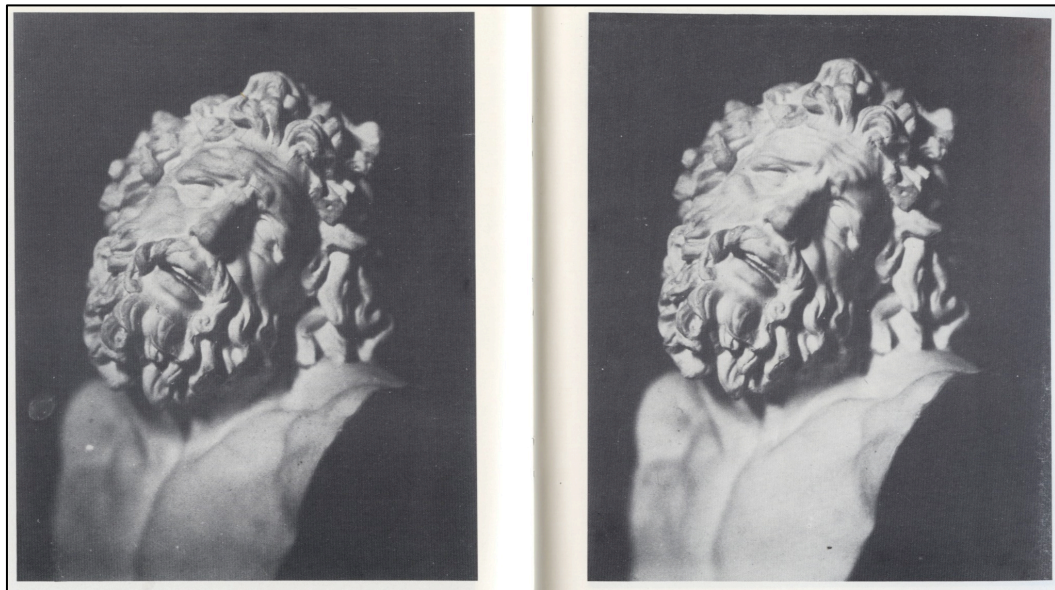


Figure 7: Facial detail of Laocoön sculpture and Duchenne's "correction"

book on his electro-physiological experiments on facial expression included a discussion of the Laocoön face in a section devoted to art.¹¹² Duchenne describes this face as “unnatural” and rather audaciously offers a correction. [see Figure 7] Of this correction Eisenstein writes: “In the ‘anatomically feasible’ version of Laocoön there is not a fraction of that dynamic effect of suffering, achieved by the cinematic method, which has made *Laocoön* immortal through the centuries!”¹¹³ It is crucial, however, to understand that this verdict does not amount to a rejection of Duchenne’s experimental findings. Nor does it suggest for Eisenstein the need to protect the domain of art from the meddling influence of science. To the contrary, the folly of Duchenne’s anatomical correction of the Laocoön face derives, in the terms of Eisenstein’s La Sarraz lecture, from his conception of art as the representational imitation of form rather than the imitation of principle. In this case, the principle in question is Duchenne’s own organicist maxim—quoted repeatedly by Eisenstein from his pamphlet on Expressive Movement forward—“L’action musculaire isolée n’est pas dans la nature” (isolated muscular action does not exist in nature).¹¹⁴ Only with this organic principle in mind, is it possible to create cinematic movement in a sculpture, the key to which lies in the

¹¹² G. -B. Duchenne de Boulogne, *The mechanism of human facial expression (Mécanisme de la physionomie humaine ou Analyse électro-physiologique de l’expression des passions* [1876]) Ed. Trans. R. Andrew Cuthbertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹¹³ SW2, 114.

¹¹⁴ SW2, 114.

“juxtaposition of the phases of an action instead of the depiction of a process.”¹¹⁵ When Eisenstein claims on a number of occasions that movement is “the basic cinematic phenomenon”¹¹⁶ (or what he calls its “*Urphänomen*”), he is not describing a phenomenon that was born with the invention of cinema.

3.6.3 Shklovsky: False Movement, Thought, and Defamiliarization

Around the same time Balázs was fashioning his physiognomic theory of cinema as the true art of Bergsonian *durée*, Eisenstein’s friend Viktor Shklovsky was arguing for the categorical exclusion of cinema from the domain of art by drawing upon Bergson’s account of the “cinematographic illusion” as a paradigm of false movement. In his 1923 pamphlet *Literature and Cinematography*, Shklovsky echoes Bergson’s famous analogy in *Creative Evolution* (1907) between the cinematographic illusion of motion out of discontinuous static frames and the error committed by the spatializing mechanism of the intellect when it tries to reconstruct mobility out of immobility.¹¹⁷ (Zeno’s paradoxes of motion provide the classical case of this error for Bergson and Shklovsky). Film’s constituent basis in discontinuity means it can never produce a direct intuition of the continuous flux that is real movement, regardless of how thoroughly that basis is suppressed in the illusion of motion. Shklovsky makes this a question for art by

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 116.

¹¹⁶ SW2 110

¹¹⁷ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*. Trans. Arthur Mitchell. New York: Dover, 1998 [1911].

situating Bergson's determination of cinematography as false movement within the critical framework he established six years earlier in one of the founding texts of Russian Formalism, "Art as Technique" (1917).¹¹⁸ Shklovsky aligns Bergson's binary of continuity/discontinuity directly with the opposition between poetic perception and automatized "recognition," the distinction that serves in "Art as Technique" to divide the formal effects of art from non-art. In his characteristic style, he sets this forth in a series of syllogistic maxims: "The continuous world is a world of vision. The discontinuous world is a world of recognition. The cinema is a child of the discontinuous world."¹¹⁹ Shklovsky immediately reduces the question of cinematic movement to one of language. Cinematography can only give us motion as a motion-sign, which, like habitualized, everyday speech (but unlike poetic language), impoverishes the experience of concrete reality by trafficking in hieroglyphic shorthand and abstraction. "The semantic motion-sign triggers our recognition; we complete it; it does not demand our attention."¹²⁰ If cinema is a language for the Shklovsky of *Literature and Cinematography*, it is language at its most distant and debased relation to experience.

¹¹⁸ Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" [1917] in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965: 30.

¹¹⁹ Viktor Shklovsky, *Literature and Cinematography*. Trans. Irina Masinovsky. Intro. Richard Sheldon. Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

With respect to cinematic adaptations of literature, film can only commit the sin of paraphrase, cancelling out poetic language while appropriating mere story and plot.

As a number of critics have pointed out, Eisenstein agrees entirely with Shklovsky's definition of cinema as false movement but he draws precisely the opposite conclusion from it.¹²¹ As we've seen in the example from the *Laocoön*, this is exactly Eisenstein's idea of what cinematic movement should be.

3.7 Eisenstein's Spectator: From Calculability to Ecstatic Form

In a late essay looking back at his formation as a director, Sergei Eisenstein tells an anecdote about a spectator from his time in the early 1920s at the First Proletkult Workers Theater. This anecdote is meant to concentrate in a single image of a face the matrix of ideas out of which his famous theory of attractions emerged: the mixture of biomechanics, reflexology, and experimental psychology that saturated leftist avant-garde Russian theater during the revolutionary period. It recounts a young boy, the son of an usher, furtively watching one of Eisenstein's rehearsals. On this child's captivated face Eisenstein claims to have glimpsed a total and direct imitation of the spectacle on stage:

I was struck by the way this boy's face mimetically reflected everything happening on stage, as though it were a mirror. And it was not only the

¹²¹ François Albera, "Eisenstein's theory of the photogram" in *Eisenstein Rediscovered*.

mimicry or actions of one or more of the characters working on stage, but of all and everything simultaneously.¹²²

Eisenstein invests this face with the force of an epiphany arriving, he says, like Newton's apocryphal apple, "at the dawn of my creative activity."¹²³ If Newtonian physics united the mechanics of terrestrial with celestial bodies, Eisenstein's theory of attractions would seek to unite form with effect, an artwork with its influence. Taken as an emblem for Eisenstein's idea of the spectator as the "basic material"¹²⁴ of theater and cinema, the face of the usher's son suggests an eminently malleable substance, less a face perhaps than a bundle of nervous tissue or unconditioned reflexes ready to be trained. The naked appearance there of the mimetic influence he calls "motor imitation" is but the visible clue to what might be accomplished with the application of a little force in the more obdurate psyches of mature spectators. Here we can call forth all the provocative metaphors the young Eisenstein liked to use for his aggressive stance towards the audience: its psyche must be "plowed" like a field, or "forged" like iron, or, if it proves inflexible, "cracked" like a skull by the kino-fist of his cinema of attractions.

¹²² Sergei Eisenstein, "How I Became a Director" [1945] in *Selected Works, Vol. III, Writings, 1934-47*. Ed. Richard Taylor and trans. William Powell (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996, 2010), 285-86.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 285.

¹²⁴ In his 1924 manifesto "The Montage of Film Attractions," Eisenstein declares that theater is "linked to cinema by a common (identical) *basic material—the audience*—and by a common purpose—*influencing this audience in the desired direction* through a series of calculated pressures on its psyche." SW1, 39.

Yet this anecdote of the usher's son also marks a distance in both thought and time from this period, even as it evokes it. For if we linger a moment on Eisenstein's description of this child's face, conjured up after a quarter century and across the span of his entire filmmaking career, we see that the figure of the spectator it presents is not finally reducible to Eisenstein's early metaphors of the audience as raw material. To begin with, it is a figure with a determinate (albeit generic) form—the face—and not a metaphorical lump of matter to be worked up. What makes this figure so astonishing, moreover, is that it assumes this form as the bearer of an image that strains the limits not just of facial anatomy but of representation itself. What face, real or imagined, could contain the *simultaneous* imitation of several actors and their expressive gestures along with the discrete shapes of inanimate objects on stage, each singly and all together in the spatial arrangement of the whole? In what sense would it still be a face?

What then do we make of the scene of spectatorship evoked in the anecdote of the usher's son, which is, above all, a scene of mimesis? There is a temptation to read the anecdote of the usher's son as a parable for Eisenstein's encounter, at the cusp of his departure from theater, with the mimetic capacities of the film medium. Cinematic mimesis conceived, that is, as the radically non-differentiating capacity to register alike the qualities of human and inhuman, movement and stasis, time and space—all on a single representational plane. We might go further along this line to locate Eisenstein's anecdote within that lineage of film theorists—from Béla Balázs to Leo Bersani—who

have described the face in cinema as a reflective surface analogous to a photosensitive plate, taking the close-up of a face on screen as an immanent expression of its own reverse shot.¹²⁵ Such a reading, however, presumes the kind of perfect symmetry or adequation between the audience and the film, which we've seen in its totalized form with Balázs's physiognomic conception of cinematic perception.

We should recall that by the time Eisenstein fashioned the anecdote of the usher's son at Proletkult, he had long since abandoned his explicit theory of attractions and developed in its place his ideas of "pathos" and "ex-stasis," effects central to his late writings, particularly *Nonindifferent Nature* and his luminous notes for a study on Disney. Placed in the context of these later conceptions of effect, the face of the usher's son appears less a figure for "attractional calculation" than an instance of what Eisenstein will come to call "formal ecstasy."¹²⁶ At its most elemental, Eisenstein's idea of ecstasy is synonymous with a pure power of becoming: "a sensing and experiencing of the primal 'omnipotence' — the element of 'coming into being' — the 'plasmaticness' of existence, from which *everything* can arise."¹²⁷ In *Nonindifferent Nature*, Eisenstein describes ecstasy as a state to which the spectator of a pathos construction can be

¹²⁵ See: Leo Bersani and Dutoit's discussion of Terrance Malick's use of facial close-ups in *The Thin Red Line* in *Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity*.

¹²⁶ EC, 126

¹²⁷ Ibid., 130

transported. As such it is at once a fusion of the subject with the object and, at the same time, a dissociation or splitting within the subject itself—“in a word,” he writes, “it is everything that forces the viewer to ‘be beside himself.’”¹²⁸ While the discussions of pathos and ecstasy in Eisenstein’s late writings were and still are sometimes read as a kind of spiritual excess in a turn to organicism and even a betrayal of his earlier commitments to a materialist constructivism, by considering how “formal ecstasy” works as a conflictual unity at the level of graphic form we can appreciate how this organicism cannot simply be dismissed as a form of what Peter Wollen once called “Symbolist reflux.”¹²⁹

3.7.1 Typing the Audience

Although Eisenstein dramatizes his anecdote of the usher’s son by presenting it as a scene of chance discovery, he had in fact systematically integrated the direct observation of audience reaction into his production methods at the Proletkult theater. One of his students there later recalled how Eisenstein would “sit with his back to the stage, facing the audience, and proceeding from the dramaturgy of the production to observe the spectators in order at the proper moment to give them a portion of tears or

¹²⁸ Sergei Eisenstein, *Nonindifferent Nature*. Trans. Herbert Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 27.

¹²⁹ Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 60. For Wollen’s own revision of his much-challenged critique of Eisenstein’s late work, see: Peter Wollen, “Perhaps...” *October*, Vol. 88 (Spring 1999): 42-50.

an armful of laughter, and occasionally force them to leap out of their seats in horror. This is how the famous theory of the Montage of Attractions came into being..."¹³⁰

Indeed, this story itself engages in a bit of Eisensteinian mythmaking insofar as the practice was not Eisenstein's invention. The attempt to calculate the reactions of the audience through direct empirical observation was a widespread practice in Soviet theater and film productions of the period. During the 1924/25 season of Meyerhold's theater, for example, analysts prepared charts for each play on which they would note the correlation between concrete stimuli and a set of audience reactions (standardized into categories ranging from "silence" or "laughter" to "leaving the auditorium" or "climbing up on stage"), noting as well the composition of the given audience (i.e. "students" or "workers," etc.).¹³¹ And already in 1920, Lenin's "Directives Concerning the Work of Agitational-Instructional Trains and Steamboats" had ordered officials to "Pay attention to the necessity of painstaking selection of films and the calculation of the action of each film on the public during its projection."¹³²

¹³⁰ Aleksandr Levshin, "At Rehearsals of 'The Wiseman'" in Alma Law and Mel Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia*. (Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company, 1996), 170.

¹³¹ Lars Kleberg, "The Audience as Myth and Reality: Soviet Theatrical Ideology and Audience Research in the 1920s." *Russian History / Histoire Russe* 9, pts. 2-3 (1982): 232-33.

¹³² Qtd. in Anne Nesbet, *Savage Junctures: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 51.

In the 1925 article “The Method of Making a Workers’ Film,” Eisenstein reports the results of his own informal attempt at empirical audience research after screening *Strike* in a worker’s neighborhood. He notes in particular the “hilarious failure” of the abattoir sequence at the end of the film, in which close-up footage of a live bull being slaughtered is intercut with a staged scene in long-shot of striking workers gunned down *en masse*.¹³³ If it proved scandalously effective for bourgeois censors — Eisenstein claims it was “responsible for 50 percent of the opposition to the film”¹³⁴— on the audience of workers “the slaughter *did not have* a ‘bloody’ effect for the simple reason that the worker associates a bull’s blood above all with the processing plants near a slaughter-house!”¹³⁵ With that audience, the attraction missed hearts for stomachs: rather than creating its intended impression of brutal repression, the documentary images of slaughter brought to mind “beef and cutlets.”¹³⁶

At this point in his thought in the mid-1920s, Eisenstein uses the episode to demonstrate the necessity of aligning attractions to an audience on the basis of “class character” (*klassovost*). He freely acknowledges the difficulty of achieving such alignment; even within the working class he notes the existence of finely grained

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ SW1, 63.

¹³⁵ SW1, 65.

¹³⁶ Qtd. in Nesbet, *Savage Junctures*, 48.

differences, such as between the reactions of metal versus textile workers to an identical show in a club.¹³⁷ The only sure solution to the unpredictability of heterogeneous reception is for the audience to be “known and selected in advance for its homogeneity.”¹³⁸ The perfect calculation of an attraction would require a work precisely suited to the set of dispositions and capacities imputed to a fixed social identity. This solution demonstrates the willingness of the young Eisenstein to take the implications of “attractional calculation” to their logical end: the successful programming of an effect demands that the audience itself be calculated in advance.

Insofar as *typage* involves the presentation of “a particular audience with a face that expresses everything on the basis of social experience,”¹³⁹ it can be understood as one attraction among others, subject to the same necessity of aligning a form with the pre-established identity of a given audience. Only such an alignment would seem to guarantee Eisenstein’s calculation that “when I present this face, the entire audience will know what is going on.”¹⁴⁰ At another level, however, the logic of *typage* exceeds this status of a particular attraction and becomes — as *typology* — a kind of meta-concept governing this entire operation of alignment.

¹³⁷ SW1, 65.

¹³⁸ SW1, 41.

¹³⁹ SW3, 9.

¹⁴⁰ Sergei Eisenstein, “Theatre and Cinema” [1934], SW3, 9.

We can see how this works by comparing typage to a proximate concept in Marxian theory—Lukács’s idea of “typicality”—first elaborated as part of his account of class consciousness during the same period as Eisenstein’s theory of attractions. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Lukács introduces a small but consequential modification to the definition of class provided in Lenin’s famous *Great Beginning* pamphlet of 1919. “Classes,” Lenin wrote, “are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production.” Lukács creates a space for his conception of class consciousness by interpolating “type” and “typicality” into Lenin’s definition.¹⁴¹ He describes classes as “clearly distinguished basic types whose characteristics are determined by the types of position available in the process of production. Now class consciousness consists in the fact of the appropriate and rational reactions ‘imputed’ to a particular typical position in the process of production.”¹⁴²

It is no doubt highly questionable whether it is ever possible to calculate in advance the effect a work will have on an audience, as the very practice of verification through empirical observation betrays. And, in pondering Eisenstein’s abandonment of “attractional calculation,” one could certainly speculate on the impact on his thought of

¹⁴¹ See Patrick Eiden-Offe, “Typing Class: Classification and Redemption in Lukács’s Political and Literary Theory,” p. 65.

¹⁴² Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 51.

the failure of his films to ever attract a truly popular audience in the Soviet Union. But it is perhaps more fruitful to consider how that abandonment might be seen as an intrinsic, if not inevitable, outcome of a deeper strain within his work. What would it mean for the artwork to align successfully with an audience? The perfect calculation of an attraction would in fact require that the audience itself be calculated in advance and a form suited to the purported capacities and dispositions of that audience be produced. Such an adequation of form to audience would entail precisely the kind of static recognition that Eisenstein says again and again is anathema to artistic thought:

For one of the aims of art is to blaze new trails in our awareness of reality, to create *new chains of association* on the basis of utilizing those which already exist. ... It is only a dull, sterile, feeble, parasitic art form that lives by exploiting the existing stock of associations and reflexes, without using them to create chains of new images which form themselves into new concepts.¹⁴³

In the very attempt to bridge the gap between form and effect, the calculation of attractions in fact reifies it as a purely external relation between artwork and spectator, which at its height can only achieve a perfect mirroring between the two, a repetition without a difference.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ SW2, 261.

¹⁴⁴ Balázs's conception of physiognomy is arguably the preeminent example of this dynamic centered on the human face. As I contend in the previous chapter, even as Balázs disavows Lavater's physiognomy for the sake of Goethe's dynamic morphology, his commitment to the revelation of a singular human essence puts Balázs finally in company with the former, his fellow "man-loving physiognomist" and his desire for the static transparency of silhouettes and corpses.

In tracing the line of Eisenstein's thought from attractions to pathos and ex-stasis, we might posit something like an axial turn away from the effort to calculate audience effects and toward questions of form. But this turn must be understood as a complex double movement: it is not a matter of Eisenstein simply abandoning the question of effect and the spectator, rather, he continues to pursue these questions as a matter internal to the problem of form itself. For it is during this period (from the late 1920s forward) that Eisenstein develops his organic ideas of montage that posit an internal relation between every level of film, from the juxtaposition of the elements in a shot to the relation between shots to the composition of the film as a whole. At the same time that this can be tracked as a development in his thought, it is also a matter of seeing how this dimension of form was already there from the beginning in the matrix of popular and artistic practices out of which Eisenstein produced his theory of attractions, particularly with respect to the attractions called *typage*, *commedia dell'arte*, caricature, and expressive movement. In each case, a radical asymmetry is produced between spectator and spectacle, which is at once the force behind their effects in the world and the dimension which opposes the reduction of those effects to calculability.

3.7.2 Expressive Movement and Contour Drawing

The disproportionate representation of a phenomenon is organically inherent in us from the very beginning.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ SW1, 141.

In his lecture at La Sarraz titled “Imitation as Mastery,” Eisenstein distinguishes between the imitation of form versus the imitation of principle, making “mastery” a function of the latter. Rather than interpreting this as a kind of Platonism, it should, in my view, be understood as part of progressive radicalization of form that can be traced back to expressive movement. Eisenstein and Tretyakov point out from the beginning of their pamphlet on “Expressive Movement” that Bode’s system of expressive gymnastics was developed as a general training method for movement in work and everyday life and not specifically intended for the stage. But far from a liability, the fact that this system had to be adopted for use in the theater was perfectly in keeping with the *LEF* program of bringing the methods of production into art. What Eisenstein and Tretyakov adopt from Bode, however, is not a form of movement *per se* but rather a system of underlying principles. This single system provides the basis for two diametrically opposed “economies” of movement—one for life, another for the stage. As Eisenstein notes some years later in a lecture at GIK (The State Institute of Cinematography), the economy of movement demanded in art “in no way corresponds to the economy of movement in life, and more often than not it is directly opposed to it.”¹⁴⁶ Utilitarian movements of work and everyday life aim to produce a material object or perform a task with a minimal expenditure of energy, whereas the objective of stage movement, the

¹⁴⁶ Law and Gordon, 203.

direct emotional agitation of an audience, demands an exaggerated expenditure of energy. Eisenstein and Tretyakov underscore this difference by ending their pamphlet with the wry observation that it “is pointless to think that the sawing of wood expressively on the stage will earn for that actor a high rate on the sawer’s labor exchange, just as the best qualified sawer will make a minimal impression on stage.”¹⁴⁷

In the circus idiom Eisenstein was so fond of, an actor has to *sell* her movements to an audience. Within the terms of expressive movement, this requires a “mastery of form,” for which Eisenstein and Tetrakovsky use the German term *Formbeherrschung* to designate “the organization of the movement process from the standpoint of spectacle.”¹⁴⁸ The economy of exaggeration internal to such movement is relative to the general economy of effect at work in the spectacle as a whole. Take, for example, Eisenstein’s discussion of “recoil movement,” a concept from Biomechanics that Eisenstein lectured on extensively at the GIK. Picturing the simple act of approaching a table:

In life it would be economical, that is, it could be done with a minimum expenditure of energy, simply to approach the table. But for economy on stage one must take several preliminary steps back toward the opposite corner. Try *not* doing that and see how much the energy loss of the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 190.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 178.

audience attention exceeds the amount the 'economical' actor saves in not observing that condition of preciseness in his work.¹⁴⁹

In fine arts, a *raccourci* is defined as the position of the body as depending on the point of view of the spectator. If we look in a horizontal position then we see it in a foreshortened form (of the position of the body and the observer of the body – in recoil).¹⁵⁰

In his lectures on Biomechanics at the Proletkult Theater, Eisenstein makes a fundamental distinction between a "*raccourci*" and "a pose." "A *raccourci* is the arrangement of the body for maximum expressiveness, the essentiality of the movement being mechanically made acute." "A pose is the arrangement of the body in a harmonious whole, pleasant for observation, without a utilitarian objective." "A pose has no relationship to the general movement, it is static, contained in itself and for itself, an end in itself, complete, nonutilitarian."

This distinction between a "*raccourci*" and a "pose" aligns perfectly with the key distinction Eisenstein draws between an "attraction" and a "stunt" (or "trick") in his 1923 article for *LEF* "The Montage of Attractions": "The attraction has nothing in common with the stunt. ... In so far as the trick is absolute and complete *within itself*, it means the direct opposite of the attraction, which is based exclusively on something relative, the reactions of the audience."¹⁵¹ On one side of this divide, the "pose" and the

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 203.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 168.

¹⁵¹ SW1, 35.

“trick” share an essential quality of autonomy. Neither requires an audience. Mastery lies in the achievement of an internal harmony in the finished object or performance itself irrespective of effect. On the other side, precisely the opposite quality—relativity to its effect—aligns Eisenstein’s definition of a *raccourci* with his concept of an attraction. Whereas the material for a “pose” or a “trick” is straight-forwardly the medium out of which it is fashioned (say, marble in the case of a sculpture or a performer’s muscles and gravity in the case of acrobatics), the “basic material” for both a theater and a cinema of attractions is—as he maintains throughout his writings of the 1920s—the *audience*.¹⁵² This definition tends to de-substantialize the notion of an attraction, making it knowable by its effects rather than its form.¹⁵³ What is evident, however, when we consider Eisenstein’s earliest statements on the “montage of attractions” in light of his (virtually contemporaneous) Proletkult lecture notes on *raccourci* is that, from the beginning, the efficacy of attraction entails substantive principles of formal composition.

In *Nonindifferent Nature* Eisenstein describes a shot from *The General Line* that we can recognize as a *raccourci* composition (though he does not name it as such.) It is the image of a “sleeping carcass of a kulak” shot “from foot to head” rather blasphemously

¹⁵² SW1, 39.

¹⁵³ David Bordwell makes this point about the early Eisenstein in *The Cinema of Eisenstein*: “The attraction is thereby defined functionally, not substantively.” p. 117

in the style of Mantegna's *The Dead Christ* or *The Foreshortened Christ* (1467) [see Figures 8 and 9]



Figure 8: Mantegna's *The Dead Christ* or *The Foreshortened Christ* (1467)



Figure 9: The Foreshortened Kulak in *The General Line*

The Kulak is foreshortened by the “plastic distortion” of the shot enabled by the 28” lens.¹⁵⁴ Whereas for André Bazin the great innovation of this lens was that it enabled deep focus, for Eisenstein it had another capacity that was “carefully avoided during the late 1920s” — the ability to produce “perspective distortion.”¹⁵⁵

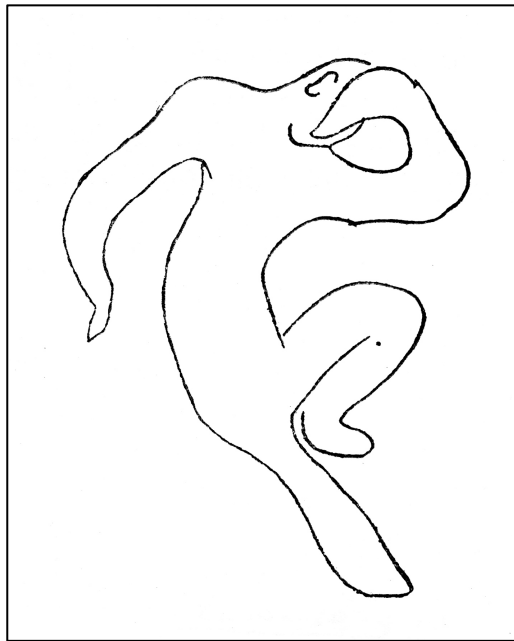


Figure 10: Eisenstein's Contour Drawing

In a set of notes about his own idiosyncratic style of contour drawing, Eisenstein seems to get at this problem in a question he poses to himself: “Why are my drawings, despite a complete lack of anatomical feasibility, humanly physiologically disturbing for

¹⁵⁴ Eisenstein, *Nonindifferent Nature*, 47

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

viewers? Would it not seem that 'non anatomical' means 'not imitative'?"¹⁵⁶ His answer is virtually identical to his description of "formal ecstasy" in Disney.¹⁵⁷ His drawings have the power of attractions because they are "*protoplasmatic, avant tout*."¹⁵⁸ In his notes for the Disney study, Eisenstein provides his typically capacious genealogy of examples of this "protoplasmatic" quality his drawings share with Disney's: from 19th century etchings of Geishas with elastic "many-metred arms" by the Japanese woodcut maker Toyohiro to the German cartoonist Walter Trier who illustrated the children's book *Arthur mit dem langen Arm* (*Arthur with the Long Arm*) (1931) and literary examples from Balzac's image of "shrinking skin" in *La Peau de chagrin* (1831) to Alice's potion-induced shrinking and growing in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865).¹⁵⁹ Such images of "plasmaticness" are, Eisenstein claims, at once "profound in thought and irresistibly attractive and exciting in form."

And you cannot help but arrive at the conclusion that a single, common prerequisite of attractiveness shows through in all these examples: a rejection of once-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, the ability to assume dynamically any form.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ "Notes on Drawing," 186.

¹⁵⁷ Indeed, I would argue that much of what he says in praise of Disney can be read as an indirect commentary on his own drawings.

¹⁵⁸ "Notes on Drawing," 186.

¹⁵⁹ "On Disney," 95-103.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

3.8 Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I want to consider two more anecdotes Eisenstein tells about audiences, each of which offers an image of motor imitation to place next to that of the usher's son's face at Proletkult with which we began.

They once almost threw me out of the Art Theatre. You've seen [Knut Hamsun's] *At the Gate of the Kingdom*. There's a moment where a couple is dancing and singing. And for some reason, I looked at the audience right at the moment when the couple was humming the waltz. When I saw how everyone was repeating it ... I couldn't keep from laughing. I gave such a guffaw that they almost threw me out.¹⁶¹

The pedagogical edge to this story lies in the fact that this irreverent outburst occurs in Stanislavsky's Art Theater. For, as Eisenstein emphasizes in "Constanza" and elsewhere, the point of revolutionary art was not to deny the power of such mimetic effects but to tear them from their mooring in bourgeois forms. His relish at witnessing an instance of hypnotic influence over an audience can certainly be read as an expression of Eisenstein's taste for didacticism. The second anecdote complicates the univocal notion of mimetic influence on display here.

In another lecture from the same period on the principle of "recoil movement" in biomechanics and expressive movement, Eisenstein recalls seeing a silent performance of a play in which both the actors and the audience were composed entirely of "deaf-

¹⁶¹ Sergei Eisenstein, "Lecture On Biomechanics, March 28, 1935" in Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 208.

mutes." He provides no details as to the time, location, subject matter, or name of the play itself. And even though Eisenstein mentions this spectacle only briefly, in a "moralizing digression" about the richness of gesture as compared to the "peristaltics" of empty talk,¹⁶² a great deal more is condensed there. On one level, the soundlessness of the performance by and for "deaf mutes" does seem to purify theatrical gesture by evacuating the voice (arguably the dominant instrument of bourgeois theater). More precisely, however, the admixture of sign language and expressive movement erases the distinction between voice and gesture. It recalls Eisenstein's idea of a "monism of ensemble," which he develops in his famous 1928 essay about the "unexpected juncture" of Kabuki theater and sound cinema.¹⁶³ Unlike the "emotional ensemble" of Western theater, in which the various elements of the performance stand in a parallel and hierarchical relation to one another, in the "monistic ensemble" of a Kabuki performance "[s]ound, movement, space and voice *do not accompany* (or even parallel) one another but are treated as *equivalent elements*."¹⁶⁴ The performance of "deaf mutes" could be

¹⁶² Ibid., 199. He goes on in this vein to speculate: "How useful it would be if for only a week or so we were to force our good 'prattlers' to speak on artistic subjects with their entire bodies, using the techniques of the deaf-mute."

¹⁶³ Eisenstein, "An Unexpected Juncture," SW1. Although he does not make the explicit connection between Kabuki theater and the performance of "deaf-mutes," he makes reference in the same lecture to the event that provided the occasion for writing "An Unexpected Juncture"—the Moscow performance in 1928 of Itakawa Sadanji's Kabuki company during their tour of the Soviet Union. "On Recoil Movement," 196.

¹⁶⁴ SW1 117.

understood as a kind of literal actualization of this equivalency. Gesture does not accompany voice because gesture here is voice. Pushed to the point of identity, this equivalency has the curious effect in Eisenstein's description of turning the monistic ensemble on its head. According to the principle of montage that Kabuki shares with Eisenstein's conception of sound cinema, the differential elements of sound and vision are aimed at a single monistic horizon: the brain of the spectator, which is the site of their synaesthetic equalization. (The montageur "bases his calculations on the final *sum* of stimulants to the brain, ignoring *which* path that stimulation takes."¹⁶⁵) In the play of "deaf mutes," conversely, the monism of elements is produced on the side of the performance. It is on the side of the audience that Eisenstein witnesses the most "astonishing" ensemble of differential elements:

Hundreds of flashing hands synchronically shooting out and going back. It made the audience look like that narrow band of the Pacific Ocean shoreline somewhere on the Mexican coast where millions of birds are flying about, reminding us with their thousands of flapping wings of an unending whirlpool.¹⁶⁶

It brings into direct contact his early work on expressive gesture with his late discussions of drawing and ecstasy. Significantly, it conjures Mexico, the place where

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Sergei Eisenstein, "On Recoil Movement," *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics*, 198.

Eisenstein found time and space to resume his youthful habit of drawing with unprecedented intensity.¹⁶⁷ As a kind of ecstatic mimesis, we might count this remarkable image among Eisenstein's instances of "formal ecstasy." It is an image of the audience as an organic form standing beside itself, with the generalizing line and the depictive elements that compose it "living separately." This image brings to mind the "plasmaticness" of contour drawing, not least because the figuration of human hands as birds in flight recalls that very "capability," as Eisenstein puts it, "of assuming any form and which, skipping along the rungs of the evolutionary ladder, attaches itself to any and all forms of animal existence."¹⁶⁸ By what logic does the mind leap from "hundreds" of hands to "millions" of birds with "thousands" of wings?

It would be tempting to relegate the first anecdote of the waltzing audience to the earlier, Pavlovian Eisenstein and to align the second anecdote with the line of flight taken by the later, organicist Eisenstein once he gave up on the dream of manipulation and turned himself over to exploring the subtleties of form. But we must remember that for Eisenstein dancing and drawing—movement and the line—are two aspects of the

¹⁶⁷ James Goodwin, *Eisenstein, Cinema, and History*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 19.

¹⁶⁸ Eisenstein, "On Disney," 101.

same thing.¹⁶⁹ This second image of audience as formal ecstasy must be understood as a direct result of Eisenstein's transformative return to the animating principles of the first: the ecstatic and the mimetic joined together in what Jacques Rancière has aptly dubbed Eisenstein's "Dionysian Pavlovism."¹⁷⁰ Or what we might simply call the plasticity of mimesis.

¹⁶⁹ Eisenstein entitled the chapter of his autobiography in which he recalls his first encounter with the technique of contour drawing: "How I Learned to Draw (A Chapter about My Dancing Lessons)." Sergei Eisenstein, *Beyond The Stars: The Memoirs of Sergei Eisenstein*. Ed. Richard Taylor, Trans. William Powell. (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1995): 567-591.

¹⁷⁰ Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*. Trans. Emiliano Battista. (Oxford ; New York: Berg,, 2006), 27.

4. Neuro-Recognition: Mirror Neurons, Empathy, and the Face

4.1 Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century, Balázs's dream of immediate recognition makes an uncanny reappearance on the scene of cognitive neuroscience. Many of his more utopian claims about cinema's physiognomic perception and the restoration of its analogue in human nature have recently been echoed on behalf of the discovery of so-called "mirror neurons." In a recent book surveying the proliferation of research on the topic over the decade and half since this class of brain cells was first identified in the frontal cortices of Macaque monkeys, one of the original discoverers has proclaimed that mirror neurons enable a "pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic form of understanding," which can "overcome all linguistic and cultural barriers."¹ And if it strikes us as naïve that Balázs could believe his conception of cinema was perfectly consonant with his Marxist commitments in the first half of the 20th century, we should note that the enthusiasm for mirror neurons in the early 21st century has captured the interest of no less of radical thinker than Paolo Virno, the contemporary Marxist philosopher who has

¹ Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia, *Mirrors in the Brain : How Our Minds Share Actions and Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xi-xiii. This identification took place in the lab of Giacomo Rizzolatti at the University of Parma and was first reported in Di Pellegrino et al., "Understanding Motor Events: A Neurophysiological Study," *Experimental Brain Research* 91, no. 1 (1992): 176-80. The term "mirror neuron" first appeared in Vittorio Gallese et al., "Action Recognition in the Premotor Cortex," *Brain* 119, no. 2 (April 1, 1996): 593-609.

hailed the discovery of mirror neurons by his Italian compatriots as the basis for “neurophysiological empathy” which originally—that is, before language introduced negation into intersubjective relations—enabled an embodied and immediate “*co-feeling*” that Virno does not hesitate to call “reciprocal recognition.”²

To specify a little further the proximate cause for this enthusiastic return to the immediacy of recognition, what distinguishes mirror neurons is the capacity to respond both when a subject performs an action (such as grasping) and when she simply sees another individual perform that action. Further this response in monkey experiments was shown to occur only in the case of actions with a discernible object or goal. Experimenters were subsequently able to demonstrate that different subsets of mirror neurons responded to kinetically similar actions when those actions were directed at different goals (i.e. grasping-to-get versus grasping-to-eat).³ The interpretation of this finding was that mirror neurons were coded not simply for actions but for intentions. Almost overnight, the hypothesis emerged that mirror neurons might provide a neurobiological explanation for how individuals ascribe thoughts and feelings (a “theory of mind”) to others.⁴ This hypothesis posits that mirror neurons produce a

² Paolo Virno, *Multitude between innovation and negation* (Los Angeles, CA; Cambridge, Mass.: Semiotext(e) ; Distributed by The MIT Press, 2007), 176.

³ Gallese et al. 1996; Fogassi et al., 2005.

⁴ As Patricia Churchland puts it: “The idea that an explanation for ‘mind reading’ all but falls out of the discovery of mirror neurons was surprisingly popular among cognitive scientists almost

“simulation” at the neural level in which one responds to the perception of another’s action or expression *as if* one were performing that same action or expression.⁵

For those neuroscientists interested in empathy, the image of the human face has become the privileged stimulus for experimenting with the mirroring neural response to the observation of feelings such as pain and disgust in the facial expressions of others.

4.2 The Naturalization of Empathy

We are wired for empathy. Such is the claim, popularized by the Italian neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni, for the neurophysiological underpinning of morality and human sociality broadly in the mirror neuron system.⁶ Attempts to naturalize moral passions are not new, of course. With respect to the focus on *empathy* in particular, its lineage can be traced back to Theodor Lipps’s theory of *Einfühlung*, which he described in 1907 as the instinct for producing an “inner imitation” of the actions and expressions

immediately. People took up mirror neurons as though the connection to mental attributions was essentially self-explanatory, or very nearly so.” Patricia Smith Churchland, *Braintrust [electronic Resource]: What Neuroscience Tells Us About Morality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press,, 2011), 137.

⁵ In *Self Comes to Mind*, Antonio Damasio acknowledges a “functional resemblance” between the simulation theory of mirror neurons and his famous idea of the “as if loop” of embodied consciousness. “So-called mirror neurons are, in effect, the ultimate as-if body device.” Antonio R Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind : Constructing the Conscious Brain*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books,, 2010), 103.

⁶ Marco Iacoboni, *Mirroring People : the New Science of How We Connect with Others*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008).

of others, an instinct essential, in Lipps's view, to the perception of aesthetic objects.⁷

And although the term "empathy" is essentially an invention of the 20th century, the idea that this capacity for identification with the inner states of others—especially their suffering—is a natural instinct has its Romanticist origins in Rousseau's theory of pity in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755). The basic operation that the discourse on mirror neurons shares with both Rousseau's notion of pity and Lipps's conception of *Einfühlung* is to locate this capacity as a moment prior to (and more fundamental than) both linguistic mediation and inferential reflection.⁸ Across these discursively and historically heterogeneous moments, the claim of immediacy—the positing of a relation without negativity—betokens naturalness.

What is obviously new in the fervor around mirror neurons, and what marks its belonging to *our* moment, is the evidential grounding in neuroscience, a field which, over the past two decades has achieved something like hegemonic status among the biological sciences, and has become, not incidentally, the favored site for suturing the humanities to the prestige (and funding sources) of the sciences. In the two decades

⁷ Theodor Lipps, "Das Wissen von fremden Ichen" (1907). A brief citation of this work seems to be a nearly obligatory gesture in scientific articles about mirror neurons. There has been a recent interest in the importance of *Einfühlung* for early film theory. For a useful survey that also makes links to recent developments in neuroscience, see: Robin Curtis, "Einfühlung and Abstraction in the Moving Image: Historical and Contemporary Reflections," *Science in Context* 25, no. 03 (2012): 425–446.

⁸ Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia, *Mirrors in the Brain : How Our Minds Share Actions and Emotions* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), xi-xiii.

since mirror neurons were first identified, empathy has emerged as a central category for ensuring the smooth transitivity between the neural and the social.⁹ If we ask, in a critical vein, how it is that empathy comes to perform this role, one approach is to demonstrate in the first place that empathy occupies the status today of a dominant social norm—namely, the ideal of mutual recognition—which makes it available to be read back into a state of nature. This paradigmatic form of ideological critique remains quite powerful and does in fact go far to explain the great enthusiasm for mirror neuron research particularly in popular news stories. What is precluded by this mode of critique, however, is the idea that the inscription of existing social norms into the findings of neuroscience might be troubled precisely by reversing the direction of this operation. By asking, that is, how neuroscience itself (and the biological sciences more broadly) might offer a position from which to call prevailing norms into question.

We can see examples of this basic move in recent work by feminist theorists such as Elizabeth Wilson and Catherine Malabou who have sought to lift the ban within critical thought on taking up an affirmative relation to the biological sciences.¹⁰ With respect to neuroscience in particular, Malabou argues that by cutting itself off from the

⁹ As a disciplinary and institutional matter, this has become most evident in new academic fields that seek to directly integrate cognitive neuroscience with sociology and other traditional social sciences. Jean Decety and William John Ickes, *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body* (Duke University Press Books, 2004); Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*.

contemporary understanding of the brain as fundamentally *plastic*, critical thought fails to apprehend both the essential historicity and the radical capacity for change (what she calls “transdifferentiation,” or changing the difference) entailed by this new understanding. What is called for, in Malabou’s view, is not the blanket denial of any consequential relation between the findings of neuroscience and questions of socioeconomic organization but rather to articulate the terms of that relation in a way that produces a different set of consequences, to construe, in other words, a relation by which the brain refuses to docilely “replicate the caricature of the world.”¹¹

We can begin to see what difference this approach might make for film theory by placing it in sharp distinction to the predominant way cognitive neuroscience has been incorporated into theories of spectatorship. We might think, for example, of the relation between the two sides of David Bordwell’s monumental body of work: on the one hand, a cognitivist approach to film spectatorship, and, on the other, a classicist approach to film form.¹² Here a positivist logic which posits a fixed set of cognitive capacities in the spectator works perfectly with a classicist logic that describes the history of film styles as the gradual perfection of forms best suited to those capacities. This commensurability

¹¹ Malabou, 78.

¹² As exemplary texts for this two sides of Bordwell’s project, see: David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). “A Case for Cognitivism” *Iris* no. 9 (Spring 1989): 11–40.

between cognitivism and the classicist commitment to form as *model* can be understood as one variant of the general tendency in the contemporary uptake of neuroscience to make a picture of the brain the ground for a “caricature of the world.”

From this perspective, the problem presented by the discourse of mirror neurons—with the centrality it places upon mimesis—is that it seems, if anything, to provide ideal evidence for simply intensifying the logic of classicism. As Jacques Rancière points out in his reading of Eisenstein, *mimesis* must be understood as two things: “It is the psychic and social power through which a word, a behavior, or an image prompts its analogue; and it is the particular regime of art that embeds this very power in the laws of genres, the construction of stories, and the representation of characters acting and expressing their sentiments.”¹³ The question then becomes how to disarticulate the first sense of mimesis as a psychic power from its embeddedness in the second as the name for the classical regime of art.

The approach I will develop in what follows, begins by posing the problem of mirror neurons as an aesthetic question in the first instance. Rather than seeking to extract from neuroscience a picture of cognition which can then be *applied* to a theory of spectatorship, I want to consider how neuroscientific experiments on mirror neurons already stage scenes of spectatorship as a necessary feature of their design. Here the

¹³ Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables / Jacques Rancière ; Translated by Emiliano Battista*. (Oxford ; New York: Berg, 2006), 23.

lineage I mentioned earlier of Lipps's concept of *Einfühlung* as an aesthetic capacity and, especially, Rousseau's account of pity, becomes quite relevant. Although Lipps is frequently cited in the scientific literature as a kind of pre-discoverer of mirror neurons, the fact that he was a philosopher of aesthetics is rarely remarked upon. Rousseau's name, on the other hand, is entirely absent even though the very idea of an instinctual, pre-linguistic identification with the suffering of others arguably has its origin in his writing.¹⁴ As critics such as David Marshall have long noted, Rousseau's desire to posit pity as an instinctual form of identification that precedes language and reflection involves him in a basic paradox. In order to illustrate the immediacy of pity at work in nature, Rousseau must *stage* it, that is, he must resort to the very social institution—theater—that introduces a separation between spectator and spectacle. As Marshall puts it, "Rousseau's own terms suggest that the state of nature is always already theatrical."¹⁵ The demonstration of immediacy requires mediation. In his famous reading of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argues that pity functions for Rousseau precisely according to the logic of the supplement. The account of empathy in the "as if" simulation theory of mirror neurons functions according to an analogous logic. If "Pity is a voice" in Derrida's reading of Rousseau, in the experiments I consider here, Empathy is a face.

¹⁴ On Rousseau's introduction into French usage of the reflexive form of the term "identification" (to identify oneself *with*) see: Pierre Force, "Self-Love, Identification, and the Origin of Political Economy," *Yale French Studies* no. 92 (January 1, 1997): 46–64.

¹⁵ David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 150.

As I turn now to a detailed analysis of these experiments, the basic question I want to pose is how, via their respective methodological reductions, they use images of the face to stage empathy as the naturalization of mutual recognition.

4.3 Experimental Design and/of Spectatorship

Plenty can be said (and has) about how the methodological reductions of neuroscientific research bracket all manner of complexity in actual social encounters, even as they repress the sociality produced within the laboratory situation itself. While acknowledging the importance of these dimensions to any robustly critical account of neuroscience in fields such as Science and Technology Studies (STS), my interest here is somewhat narrower. Rather than critiquing the design of the mirror neuron experiments I consider for their relative impoverishment vis-à-vis the “ecological” messiness of real life encounters, my approach is to affirm and even amplify the artificiality of the experimental reductions involved. To claim that empathy must be staged in order to appear as a natural instinct is not the same as claiming that it is purely ideological mystification. On the contrary, as is true of the rhetoric of theatricality that pervades 18th century moral sense philosophy, it is to contend that the reality of empathy is inseparable from the act of staging itself.

Before turning in detail to the two specific mirror neuron experiments we will consider, I want to first describe their basic design, which can also stand as a template or formal structure shared by hundreds if not thousands of experiments that use functional

magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to measure neural responses to visual stimuli. Test subjects are placed in a machine and shown images of various facial expressions while the experimenters conduct a series of brain scan “runs” on them. As we’ll see, this experimental set-up accommodates a number of variables while retaining its basic structure: the number and identities of the test subjects; the medium of the images presented as stimuli (e.g. still photographs or moving video); the means of delivering those images to the subjects inside of the narrow confines of the fMRI tube (e.g. through a system of mirrors or magnet compatible goggles); and, most significantly, the nature of the tasks the subjects were asked to perform (e.g. alternation between passively observing and actively imitating). Across these variations, the set-up is devised to produce the same basic experimental phenomenon: by using facial images as stimuli the investigators attempt to elicit a mimetic response in the neural activity of their subjects that fMRI can detect, measure, and localize—to catch the brain in the act of imitating a face, so to speak.

Although not published in a mirror neuron study, Figure 11 provides a useful illustration of this experimental design by showing the physical position of the test subject. This illustration was published in a study that sought to establish a neural correlate for the tendency to involuntarily imitate the facial expressions of others, especially happy ones, a commonly observed phenomenon the investigators call

“contagious” smiling.¹⁶ The subject is pictured within the enclosure of the fMRI machine (at left), while the stimulus he is viewing is shown via a split-screen insert in the lower left corner.¹⁷ Pictured on the right side of the illustration is a sample from the taxonomy of photographs expressing three emotional modes—happy, neutral, sad—from which the stimuli were drawn.¹⁸ For this particular experiment, it was important to have a video record of the subject’s face that could be directly compared to the stimulus. While

¹⁶ Barbara Wild et al., “Why Are Smiles Contagious? An fMRI Study of the Interaction Between Perception of Facial Affect and Facial Movements,” *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* 123, no. 1 (May 1, 2003): 17–36. The subjects (5 female, 5 male, average age 29) viewed a series of photographs of faces expressing the three emotional modalities (12 photos for each emotion, shown three times each, at random). Although the investigators briefly invoke the research on mirror neurons in their speculations about the causal mechanism, the study focused only on localizing the neural correlate for the propensity to imitate facial expressions in the media basotemporal lobes.

¹⁷ The photos of the faces were presented via a system of mirrors reflecting images that were back-projected on a translucent screen positioned above the subject’s feet. The video footage of the subject’s face shown in split-screen was obtained with a video camera attached to the fMRI head coil.

¹⁸ These images were taken directly from Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen’s *Pictures of Facial Affect* (Consulting Psychologists Press, 1976), which provided black and white slides of photographs of posed facial expressions for six discrete affect categories. More on this below.

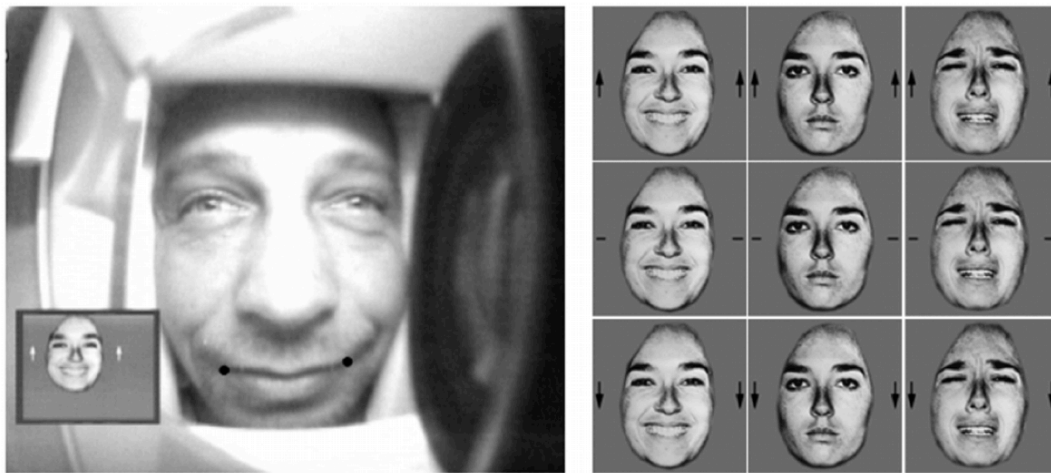


Figure 11: "Stimulus material and camera view." From Barbara Wild, et al., "Why Are Smiles Contagious?"

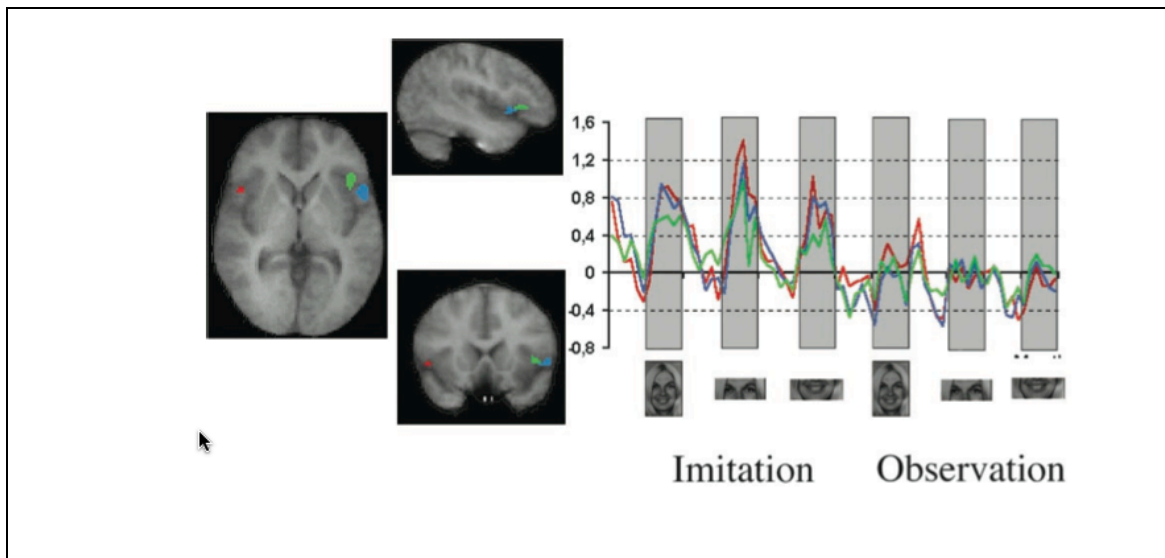


Figure 12: From Laurie Carr, et al., "Neural mechanisms of empathy in humans."

viewing each image, the subjects were instructed to move the corners of their mouths either upwards or downwards, or to refrain from movement, according to the

directional arrows superimposed on the photos. The split-screen image was therefore more than a mere “illustration” of the experimental design; it constituted primary data. For the mirror neuron experiments we will consider in detail below, there was no need to record the facial expressions of the subjects. The correlation the investigators were interested in was strictly between the stimuli and neuronal activity in a targeted area of the brain. The evidential elements for these experiments are visualized in Figure 12, an illustration published in one of the path-breaking studies of mirror neurons and empathy in humans.

On one level, the first illustration (Figure 11) simply illustrates for us an otherwise “hidden” view of the experimental set-up that yields the evidence presented in figure 12. At the same time, by heuristically positioning them as a sequence (as above) these images can tell us something more general about the shift from illustration to evidence. Most obviously, in the transition from the first to the second image, the face of the test subject falls out and is replaced by an image of the brain. There are two contradictory ways in which it is possible to say that by virtue of displacing it the brain gives us the “truth” of the face. The first is as a kind of unmasking whereby the illusion that the face expresses a singular human essence or “soul” is literally stripped away to reveal the impersonal materiality of the brain. The neuropsychologist Paul Broks provides a vivid description of just such an unmasking:

The illusion is irresistible. Behind every face there is a self. We see the signal of consciousness in a gleaming eye and imagine some ethereal

space beneath the vault of the skull, lit by shifting patterns of feeling and thought, charged with intention. An *essence*. But what do we find in that space behind the face, when we look? The brute fact is there is nothing but material substance: flesh and blood and bone and brain... You look down into an open head, watching the brain pulsate, watching the surgeon tug and probe, and you understand with absolute conviction that there is nothing more to it. There's no one there.¹⁹

The second way of understanding the transition from face to brain as a moment of "truth" effectively reverses the direction of this demystifying operation by investing the image of the brain with physiognomic meaning. This meaning, expressed across the surface of the face in the first image, would be seen to overlay the deep materiality of the brain as a kind of afterimage in the second. Construing our experimental design in this essentially Balázsian mode would mean above all construing the mimetic response of the brain to the stimulus of a face *as if* they were isomorphic. Or to put it in Balázs's own terms, the (now neural) conditions of possibility for the perception of facial expression—physiognomy as a transcendental category—posses the organic structure of a face. As I've argued in the previous chapters, the question of whether or not cinema stands in a relation of adequation to the spectator—and whether the face in cinema betokens such a relation—is at the crux of the difference between Balázs and Eisenstein. As we'll see below, that difference reemerges in an uncanny way in this scientific setting, with important consequences for how we understand the claims made on behalf of mirror neurons.

¹⁹ Paul Broks, *Into the Silent Land: Travels in Neuropsychology* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2004), 17. Qtd. in Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 163.

There is, of course, the crucial question of how we approach the comparison between such materially, socially, and phenomenologically heterogeneous situations of spectatorship: an individual test subject viewing an image in a mirror or through goggles while ensconced in an fMRI tube versus an audience member gazing upon a big screen projection in a crowded movie theater. No doubt, the fact that the experimental set-up constructs a situation roughly homologous to cinematic spectatorship while also seeming to distill the activity of a film spectator to basic elements of an image and a brain encourages the temptation on the part of some cognitive film theorists to apply the findings of neuroscience to theories of spectatorship. As with all applications of neuroscience to the social and cultural domain, the success of this application can be said to stand or fall on how carefully the brackets are removed as the extrapolation is made from the laboratory, with its various methodological reductions, to the messiness of the movie theater. As I've already indicated, however, my aim is not to produce another cultural critique of the reductions involved in using neuroscience in this way. Instead, I want to reverse the standard operation by bringing film theory—specifically the fundamental difference between Balázs and Eisenstein that I've been examining in the previous chapters—to bear on the experimental setting.

Returning to the illustration in Figure 11 we can see how it recalls a familiar *mise-en-scène*, staged as a moment of reflexivity countless times in the history of cinema, in which the close-up of the face of an individual spectator in a movie theater is presented

in a shot/reverse shot with the image of a face on screen. In precisely this way, recognition is staged in the form of a face-to-face mimesis. Jean-Luc Godard exemplifies (and comments upon) this paradigmatic moment in the scene from *Vivre sa vie* (*My Life to Live*, 1962) in which the would-be actress Nana, played by Anna Karina, gazes in tears upon the face of Renée Falconetti at a screening of Carl Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (*The Passion of Joan of Arc*, 1928). [see Figure 13]



Figure 13: Nana (Anna Karina) mimics the tears of Joan (Maria Falconetti)



Figure 14: Asta Nielsen

Although Balázs mentions Dreyer's film in a number of texts, the silent screen actress whose face he most fetishizes is not Falconetti but the Danish star Asta Nielsen. [see Figure 14] In a fawning portrait included at the end of *Visible Man*, Balázs remarks how Nielsen's "facial expressions mime those of the person she is speaking to. ... Her face wears not only her own expression but, barely noticeably (although we always sense it), the expression of her interlocutor, which is reflected as in a mirror."²⁰

By way of comparison we can recall Eisenstein's anecdote in "How I Became a Director" of the face of the usher's son mimetically reflecting a rehearsal at the Proletkult theater, discussed at the end of the previous chapter. He links the epiphany of this experience to his knowledge of "motor imitation" and William James's "famous formula that 'we are not crying because we are sad; but we are sad because we are crying.'"²¹ The connection to mirror neuron research here is not incidental. A number of the most skeptical critics of this research have argued that mirror neurons are the latest chapter in the long history of motor theories of cognition that stretches from Berkeley's motor interpretation of visual depth perception (1709) to William James's ideomotor theory in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) through various mid-20th-century motor theories of

²⁰ Béla Balázs, *Béla Balázs : Early Film Theory : Visible Man and The Spirit of Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 88.

²¹ Sergei Eisenstein, *Selected Works, 1934-47* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 286.

speech perception.²² Merely locating mirror neurons within this lineage functions as a kind of critique, it seems, because it suggests that they appeal to the same desire for simple explanations that has purportedly driven the periodic interest in motor theories of cognition in the past. “The [motor] theory is so simple and so easy to present that every one is glad to believe it. ... there is nothing in the mind that has not been explained in terms of movement.”²³ This quote, taken from the Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association meeting in 1910, is cited by one critic as an apt description of the interest in mirror neurons today. From an Eisensteinian perspective, however, it is precisely the aesthetic appeal of the motor theory that counts. The decisive question for us is whether or not the mimesis involved is understood to produce symmetrical adequation or a repetition with a difference.

4.3.1 The Mimetic Gap

The experimental set-up we’ve been reading as a *mise-en-scène* of spectatorship begs a further question: how does it position its own spectator, in this case the

²² Gregory Hickok, “Eight Problems for the Mirror Neuron Theory of Action Understanding in Monkeys and Humans,” *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 21, no. 7 (January 13, 2009): 1229–1243; Allan Young, “The Social Brain and the Myth of Empathy,” *Science in Context* 25, no. 03 (2012): 401–424. For an historical overview of such motor theories prior to the discovery of mirror neurons, see: E. Scheerer, “Motor theories of cognitive structure: A historical review” in D. A. Allport, Wolfgang Prinz, and A. F. Sanders (Eds.), *Cognition and Motor Processes* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1984).

²³ Walter Pillsbury, “The place of movement in consciousness.” *Psychological Review*, 18, 84. Qtd. in Hickok, “Eight Problems for the Mirror Neuron Theory of Action Understanding in Monkeys and Humans,” 1229.

investigator, who observes the spectacle of mimesis from a third-person perspective? (And here again we might recall Eisenstein furtively observing the usher's son in the foyer during a rehearsal.) To begin with, we should notice that the design of these experiments manages to evade altogether what is perhaps the most irreducible problem of neuroscience with respect to perspective. In the neuroscience laboratory, this problem appears as an unbridgeable gap between the mutually exclusive levels of a test subject's first-person phenomenological description and the experimenter's third-person observation of neural activity in a brain scan. There is no perspective from which these two levels can be mediated or synthesized. That is why Slavoj Žižek identifies this as *the* contemporary example of what he calls the "parallax gap." As he describes it, it is the "gap between the 'inside' experience of meaning and the 'outside' view of a flat, meaningless organism, this piece of meat that sustains our experience."²⁴ In the experiments I'm considering here, this gap is not an issue for the simple reason that they exclude from consideration the first-person experience of their test subjects. These subjects are simply not asked, as part of the experimental design, whether they actually experience any of the feelings their brains are purportedly simulating when they look at facial expressions of happiness or disgust or pain. We will return to the question of this exclusion as it figures in an important recent critique of one of these experiments by the historian of science Ruth Leys, with which I will engage at some length later in this

²⁴ Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 222.

chapter. For the moment, it is enough to note that this bracketing of first-person experiences enables a unified perspective from which the investigator can empirically observe the relation between two material representations: the image of a brain responding to the image of a face.

Nevertheless, even to call these both “images” already risks a basic confusion. An fMRI scan is not a picture of a brain in the sense that a photograph or video pictures a facial expression. While both are technological mediations, the nature and complexity of these mediations is fundamentally asymmetrical. Any relation between these images must be understood to occur across the gap constituted by this asymmetry. If that relation is itself posited as essentially mimetic, the evidence for it on the side of the brain scan is produced in a resolutely non-mimetic image. The bracketing of the “classical” gap between mind and brain in these experimental situations corresponds to the opening of another gap at the level of representation.

To clarify the nature of this gap, a brief technical description of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) is in order.²⁵ Contrary to a common perception, the

²⁵ For an exceptionally clear account of fMRI that examines its strengths and weakness as an imaging medium, see: Adina Roskies, “Neuroimaging and Inferential Distance,” *Neuroethics* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 2008): 19–30. In addition to this text, my description of fMRI technology below also draws from: Patricia Smith Churchland, *Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us About Morality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 123–6; Kelly A Joyce, *Magnetic Appeal: MRI and the Myth of Transparency* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Alva Noë, *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain, and Other Lessons from the Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 19–24; Nikolas S Rose and Joelle M Abi-Rached, *Neuro: The New Brain Sciences and the Management of the Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 53–81.

magnetic resonance machine does not detect electrical signals produced by neurons firing. It is an indirect measure of neural activity based on fluctuations in the magnetic properties of blood flow in the brain. The magnetic susceptibility of water molecules in the blood is affected by the concentration of deoxygenated hemoglobin molecules; oxygenated hemoglobin increases the signal, deoxygenated hemoglobin reduces it. This difference, called the blood-oxygen-level-dependent (BOLD) contrast, is picked up by detectors and used to estimate the average level of activity in a volume of brain tissue. Active neurons use more oxygen, so when a region of the brain is activated local blood vessels dilate and it receives an influx of oxygenated blood. Of course, the time scale of neuronal firing is much shorter than these vascular changes, so the BOLD contrast must be calculated as a physiological consequence of neural activity that has occurred some seconds previously. Accounting as precisely as possible for this delay, researchers design experiments that use fMRI to measure brain activity during the performance of a specific task, such as observing and imitating photos of faces in the case of our examples.

A great deal of technical and theoretical complexity is already involved at this first level of generating raw data. The next level, translating that data into the anatomical representation of a brain, introduces a host of additional difficulties. The initial format into which this data is fed is not an image but an abstract structure of numerical values and signal intensities called “k-space.” Rendering this data structure into a spatial and temporal image of the brain requires running it through tremendously

complex algorithms. This computational process is in effect a kind of statistical averaging that “involves transforming, smoothing, warping, and stretching the data on each individual to fit the standard anatomical space.”²⁶ What results from this process of averaging may be a brain image, but, as one philosopher of neuroscience puts it, “it is not an image of a brain. Brain images are best thought of as generalizations, not particulars.”²⁷ Add to this the fact that the color schemes for representing neural activity, so familiar from images published in the popular press, are arbitrary conventions (i.e. reds for highly active, blues for less), and it becomes entirely evident why fMRI brain images should be regarded as “more akin to scientific diagrams or schematics than to photographs.”²⁸

The final level of mediation involves the functional correlation of brain images to specific cognitive tasks. This is not only a matter of how the images are interpreted once they are produced but goes to the heart of how the experiment is designed in the first place. Because the majority of neural activity is devoted to ongoing, non-task-related brain functions, there must be a way to isolate the small portion of activity that is devoted to the task being studied. This requires positing a “functional decomposition”

²⁶ Rose and Abi-Rached, *Neuro*, 78.

²⁷ Roskies, “Neuroimaging and Inferential Distance,” 26.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

of the task in order to subtract all of the information from other functions that are occurring in the same brain regions.

It is one thing to call attention to the rhetorical power of fMRI images in popular accounts of the latest neuroscientific studies; it is another to claim that investigators themselves are under the sway of the same “myth of transparency” (to quote the subtitle of a recent sociological critique of fMRI).²⁹ The opacity of these brain images with respect to phenomena they mediate is an unavoidable dimension of scientific practice. One point of my cursory attempt at a technical description of the three levels of mediation above is to underscore the fact that researchers who use fMRI are by necessity intimately familiar with the way that the epistemological status of brain scans depends on innumerable technical and theoretical choices for the simple reason that they must grapple with and defend these choices at every level of their experimental design and execution. To the extent that there is something like a myth of transparency in the experimental set-up we’ve been considering, it is at work on the side of the photographs and videos of facial expression used as stimuli.

²⁹ Joyce, *Magnetic Appeal*. There have been a number of studies examining the epistemologically compelling effect of brain scan images on consumers of scientific literature, even when those images add no explanatory value. While these studies have shown that this bias effects both naïve subjects and those with some minimal college level neuroscience training, it was not shown to have an effect on practicing neuroscientists. See: Deena Skolnick Weisberg et al., “The Seductive Allure of Neuroscience Explanations,” *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 20, no. 3 (November 15, 2007): 470–477; Cayce J. Hook and Martha J. Farah, “Look Again: Effects of Brain Images and Mind–Brain Dualism on Lay Evaluations of Research,” *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 25, no. 9 (April 22, 2013): 1397–1405.

4.3.2 Neural Mechanisms for Empathy in General

My first example of an experiment using mirror neurons to establish the neurophysiological basis for empathy was published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* under the title “Neural Mechanisms of Empathy in Humans.”³⁰ For this experiment, conducted at UCLA by Laurie Carr (along with Marco Iacoboni), functional MRI scans were run of 11 test subjects while they viewed (through goggles) a randomly ordered set of still photographs of human faces, each depicting one of six “basic” emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, disgust, and fear) and either imitated or simply observed these expressions. [see Figure 9] Carr et al. sought to determine whether a region of the brain called the insula provides a neural pathway between the mirror neuron system located in the superior temporal and inferior frontal cortices and the system for emotions located in the limbic system. By demonstrating that during these observations of facial expression, the three areas of the brain in question—mirror neurons, limbic system, and insula—were simultaneously activated, this experiment provided evidence for precisely how the “as if” loop of inner imitation might extend to emotions. In doing so, these results considerably strengthened the hypothesis that, as Iacoboni put it, “our mirror neurons fire when we see others expressing their emotions, as if we were making those expressions ourselves. By means

³⁰ Carr, Laurie, Marco Iacoboni, Marie-Charlotte Dubeau, John C Mazziotta, and Gian Luigi Lenzi. “Neural Mechanisms of Empathy in Humans: A Relay from Neural Systems for Imitation to Limbic Areas.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 100, no. 9 (April 29, 2003): 5497–5502.

of this firing, the neurons also send signals to emotional brain centers in the limbic system to make us feel what other people feel.”³¹

4.3.3 “Both of Us Disgusted in *My* Insula”

The second experiment I want to consider was published just eight months later under the rather amazing title: “Both of Us Disgusted in *My* Insula: The Common Neural Basis of Seeing and Feeling Disgust.”³² Conducted by Bruno Wicker and his colleagues in Marseille, this experiment built upon Carr et al.’s findings. Whereas the earlier study did not seek to identify distinct neural pathways for different emotions, Wicker et al. focused exclusively on disgust. The experimental setup they devised was to scan the brains of 14 test subjects while they viewed videos of faces looking disgusted and again when these subjects were subjected to a disgusting smell. (The control expressions here were classified as “pleasure” and “neutral.”) [see Figure 15] What Wicker et al. sought to demonstrate was that the same locations in the insula are activated during the actual experience of disgust and during the observation of the facial expression of disgust in others. [see Figure 15] Their conclusion about the ramifications

³¹ Iacoboni, *Mirroring People*, 119.

³² Bruno Wicker et al., “Both of Us Disgusted in My Insula: The Common Neural Basis of Seeing and Feeling Disgust,” *Neuron* 40, no. 3 (October 30, 2003): 655–664.

of their findings was no less sweeping than Iacoboni's: "this finding provides a unifying mechanism for understanding the behaviors of others."³³

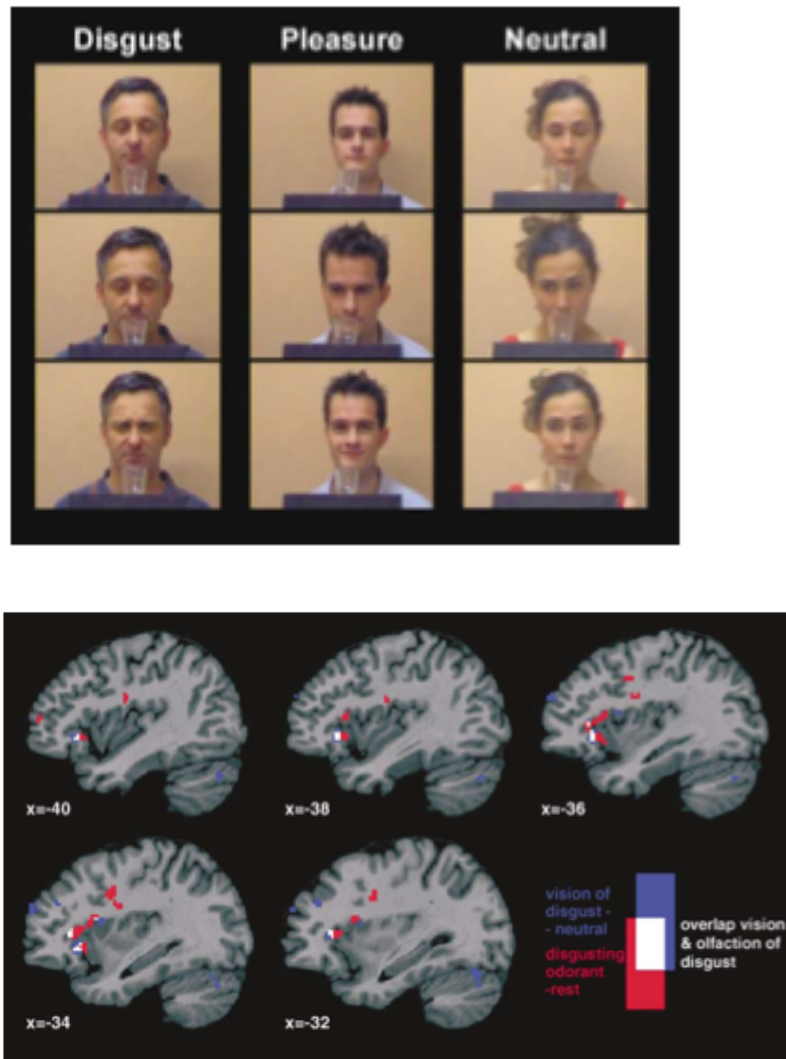


Figure 3. Illustration of the Overlap

Figure 15: "Both of Us Disgusted" Stimuli and Response

³³ Ibid., 655.

From the beginning, the claims made on behalf of a mirror neuron system in humans have been contested both from within the neuroscientific community and without. In the next section, I will consider two lines of critique: one from within the humanities that focuses on the faces used, the other from within neuroscience that preserves the idea of mirror neurons but effectively displaces the face.

4.4 The Heteronomy of Affect

The still images used in Carr et al.'s experiment were taken directly from the psychologists Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen's *Pictures of Facial Affect* (1976), which provided black and white slides of photographs of posed facial expressions that purported to present the prototypical expressions of six discrete affect categories.³⁴ According to the paradigm (first developed by Ekman's teacher, Silvan Tomkins) upon which this taxonomy of facial expressions was based, emotions are understood to be "rapid, phylogenetically old, automatic responses of the organism that have evolved for survival purposes and lack the cognitive characteristics of the higher-order mental processes."³⁵ This conception of evolutionarily hardwired emotion underlies Ekman's

³⁴ Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, *Pictures of Facial Affect* (Consulting Psychologists Press, 1976).

³⁵ Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3 (March 1, 2011): 437.

claim that the facial expressions of the basic emotions are universally recognizable across all cultures.³⁶

In Ruth Leys's critical account, Ekman's images of facial expression and the paradigm upon which it is based have achieved a hegemonic status in the study of emotion in the experimental sciences.³⁷ While this claim has been contested, it certainly holds true for mirror neuron experiments concerning empathy. The Tomkins/Ekman paradigm of emotion is crucial to the claim that the neural imitation of emotion is an immediate and natural response whose explanatory framework is to be found in evolutionary adaptation. When two of the founding figures of mirror neuron research write in a recent book-length introduction to the topic that mirror neurons enable a "pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic form of understanding" which can "overcome all linguistic and cultural barriers," they perfectly sum up the very qualities imputed to the images of facial expression used to experimentally demonstrate these claims in the first place.

But simply pointing out this tautology is hardly a critique. It merely restates, at another level, what these experiments already affirm: a mimetic relation between the image of the brain and the image of the face. Something more is required. In her critique

³⁶ For Ekman's narrative of his struggle to assert this claim against "cultural relativists" such as Margaret Mead, see his afterward to: Charles Darwin and Paul Ekman, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³⁷ Leys argues that the reasons for this dominance are institutional rather than scientific. Ruth Leys, "How Did Fear Become a Scientific Object and What Kind of Object Is It?," *Representations* 110, no. 1 (May 1, 2010): 66–104; Leys, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique."

of Ekman, Leys points out the persistent problems created for his taxonomy of facial expressions by the necessity that they be *posed* expressions, a fact that Ekman readily acknowledges without ever fully resolving its ambiguities. For Leys, Ekman's inability to come to terms with this problem of posing—which she identifies as the recurring “motif” in criticisms of his project—is symptomatic of Ekman's false separation of the natural and the cultural in the expression of emotions. Leys's polemic here is aimed against what she calls the “anti-intentionalist” trend that in her view characterizes the recent turn to affect across the humanities. What she seeks to assert, against this trend, is the irreducible embeddedness of emotion in contexts of meaning and intention.

While I follow Leys's critique of Ekman³⁸ (and, to a lesser extent, her critique of affect theory), I want to put that critique to very different ends. My interest here is not to catch Ekman out for disavowing the cultural dimension of his facial expression taxonomy, even while he smuggles it back in through the pose. Nor do I want to dissolve the autonomous force of these posed facial expressions into a field of meaningful “thick description” of the sort that Leys advocates. To the contrary, I want to preserve that autonomous force by stressing the posed, artificial, and constructed qualities of facial expression stimuli as a constitutive dimension of the experiments I'm

³⁸ Which is, as Leys herself emphasizes, largely a reconstruction of the critique that already exists as a minority view in the field of emotion in the experimental sciences. See, for example: Alan J. Fridlund, *Human Facial Expression: An Evolutionary View* (Academic Press, 1994).

considering. Something of that force is inadvertently captured in a remark made by the philosopher Ian Hacking in a review (quoted approvingly by Leys) of Ekman's annotated edition of Charles Darwin's *The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals* and two other recent books on emotion. Hacking describes the illustrations of faces chosen by Darwin and Ekman as "quite extraordinary social documents" and remarks that "I am not sure I have seen anyone in real life looking like any of these people."³⁹ Far from undermining the experiments I'm considering (as it seems to for both Hacking and Leys), this apparently unnatural or posed aspect of the facial images used for stimuli is precisely what enables us, in my view, to think mirror neurons in a way that exceeds the consensualist horizon of empathy-as-instinct in which they are typically placed. The point, to be clear, is not to falsify the claims for the biological in these experiments by showing how the purportedly "natural" in them was "cultural" all along, but, rather, to consider how these experiments reveal an unexpected proximity between the biological and what we might call a fictional capacity.

As we've already noted, fMRI scans were performed on the test subjects both when they observed the video of a disgusted human face and when they were asked to smell a disgusting odor. This experiment becomes even more interesting, however, when we discover how the videos of disgusted faces were produced. [See Figure15] The

³⁹ Ian Hacking, "By What Links are the Organs Excited?" *Times Literary Supplement* (July 17, 1998), 11.

experimenters recruited actors from a theater school in Marseille. These actors were filmed while they leaned forward to smell the content of a glass set in front of them. The glass contained, alternately, pure water (for neutral), perfume (for pleasure), or a stink bomb obtained from a toy store (for disgust). After smelling, the actors were asked to lean back and display the appropriate emotion “in a natural but clear way.” Once each emotion had been filmed several times per actor, the “most natural example” was chosen by the experimenters.⁴⁰ There is a telling ambiguity in this procedure. On the one hand, it would seem that the problem of posing had been solved by having the actors actually undergo the experience of disgust (or at least smelling an unpleasant odor just like the test subjects did). And yet it was still deemed necessary to hire actors who could convincingly display the facial expression judged appropriate (“natural”) to that experience. That is, they were asked simultaneously to experience *and* to simulate disgust. What are we to make of this seeming redundancy on the side of the stimulus? To begin with, it would appear that the experimenters chose not to assume a guaranteed relation between the feeling state of disgust and its expression in the face. The correct relation had to be doubly insured: first by the actors performing it and again by the selection by the experimenters of the best (i.e. most “natural”) performances. What this aspect of the experiment reveals, I think, is there is a kind of internal split, an “as if” simulation at work on the side of the stimulus as well. We might say, then, that what is

⁴⁰ Wicker et al., “Both of Us Disgusted in My Insula,” 661.

staged between the image of the brain and the image of the face is the relation between *two simulations*, two *as if's*. Once we pose the relation in this way, the claims to immediacy and nature fall away, and questions of form and habit emerge to take their place. Together these terms describe one side of Malabou's concept of "plasticity," the sculptural capacity to seize and retain form.

4.5 Pavlov's Return: Mirror Neurons and Associational Conditioning

One of the more incisive critics of mirror neurons from inside the discipline of cognitive science, Cecelia Heyes, comes close to this line of thought by arguing that the existence of mirror neurons is best explained as a byproduct of associative learning rather than evolutionary adaptation. Following Heyes, it would then be possible to conceive of motor neurons that "learn" to become mirror neurons, which means the co-existence of perception and action in a given neuron or system of neurons would be contingent and changeable rather than a fixed inheritance.⁴¹

...

4.6 Conclusion: Mirror Neurons Beyond Good and Evil

Thought is one thing, and deed another, and the image of a deed yet another. The wheel of causality does not roll between them.

--Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

⁴¹ See: Cecelia Heyes, "Where Do Mirror Neurons Come From?," *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 34, no. 4 (March 2010): 575–583.

By way of conclusion, I want to consider a scene of media spectatorship invoked by Marco Iacoboni as an anecdotal illustration of mirror neurons at work. In his popular book, *Mirroring People: The Science of Empathy and How We Connect with Others*, Iacoboni describes his experience watching a televised replay of the championship match of the 2006 World Cup between France and Italy. The incident he focuses on is the famous head-butting of the Italian player Marco Materazzi by the French Algerian player Zinedine Zidane in the final minutes of extra time before the penalty kicks that decided the match. Re-watching what he calls the “folly” of the “savage” Zidane head-butt, Iacoboni writes, “I feel my original emotions of the moment almost as powerfully as ever, but I feel no emotions watching the missed penalty kick, which, in the long run, one could argue was far more important than Zidane’s head-butt.” “Why did only Zidane’s head-butt trigger my strong emotional reaction a month later?” he asks. His answer is that by virtue of his mirroring neural response, “[w]hen I see the head-butt, I am watching two bodies colliding, a head hitting a chest, and the faces of the two men roiled by strong emotion. I have an immediate, unmediated, and automatic understanding of what these two individuals feel.”⁴² It would be difficult to overstate the sheer poverty of Iacoboni’s reduction here of the event that was Zidane’s head-butt to the transparency of his personal empathic response.

⁴² Iacoboni, *Mirroring People*, 108.

The Nietzschean line of critique I want to suggest here does not derive, however, from his well-known attack on pity in the *Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, but rather from a brief but enigmatic episode titled “On the Pale Criminal” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In this episode of the novel, Zarathustra comes across a scene in The Motley Cow in which a murderer and thief has just been sentenced to death. Zarathustra addresses himself to the judges who insist that the condemned man (the “pale criminal”) nod his head in assent to the justice of the sentence before they carry out the execution. The “red judge” declares that the pale criminal murdered in order to rob, but Zarathustra rejects this ascription of motive:

I say to you: his soul wanted blood, not robbery. He thirsted for the bliss of the knife. But his poor reason did not comprehend this madness and it persuaded him. “What does blood matter?” it said. “Don’t you at least want to commit robbery in the process? Take revenge?”⁴³

It is because he has come to believe this retrospective ascription of motive that the criminal has turned pale and sick. “An image made this pale human pale.” Zarathustra says. “He was equal to his deed when he committed it, but he could not bear its image once he had done it.”⁴⁴ For Zarathustra, health and the affirmation of life in this situation would consist in the refusal of that logic of motive, in affirming the

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ed. Robert Pippin, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 26.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

knowledge that, as he tells the red judge: "Thought is one thing, and deed another, and the image of a deed yet another. The wheel of causality does not roll between them."⁴⁵

With this last statement in mind we can return to the question of mirror neurons in Iacoboni's account of (re)watching Zidane's head-butt. We might say that what enables the immediacy of Iacoboni's empathic understanding of the event is the same thing that underlies the certainty of his moralizing response: that the "wheel of causality" does roll between thought and deed because, at the neural level, perception is coextensive with action, and "empathy" is nothing other than the image of this fact. What such a fusion seeks to foreclose is precisely the gap opened up between perception and action, which is also the gap between the "is" and the "ought," by the fictional capacity of the "as if."

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Coda: “A Gesture Can Blow Up a Town”

Throughout this dissertation I have been examining how the face in cinema has been made to bear a conception of recognition that turns on the binary of mediation/immediacy. Working through and against this conception, I’ve also attempted to trace an idea of form that is not reducible to this binary—plasticity—which I adapt from Catherine Malabou’s reading of Hegel and trace as a core principle in Sergei Eisenstein’s aesthetics. I now want to ask more directly what it would mean to stage a scene of *plastic recognition* as such. That is, a scene in which the materiality of an encounter is somehow constituted or structured by plasticity’s three-fold capacity to receive, retain, and destroy form.

In the spirit of Eisenstein, I’ve chosen as my final illustration of a phenomenon I’ve been exploring almost exclusively in cinema, a non-cinematic example. It is a passage from a James Baldwin essay entitled “They Can’t Turn Back,” originally published in the August 1960 issue of *Mademoiselle*. The scene Baldwin constructs here is worth quoting at length:

I am the only Negro passenger at Tallahassee’s shambles of an airport. It is an oppressively sunny day. A black chauffeur, leading a small dog on a leash, is meeting his white employer. He is attentive to the dog, covertly very aware of me and respectful of her in a curiously watchful, waiting way. She is middle-aged, beaming and powdery-faced, delighted to see both the beings who make her life agreeable. I am sure that it has never occurred to her that either of them has the ability to judge her or would judge her harshly. She might almost, as she goes toward her chauffeur, be greeting a friend. No friend could make her face brighter. If she were smiling at me that way I would expect to shake her hand. But if I should put out my hand, panic, bafflement, and horror would then

overtake that face, the atmosphere would darken, and danger, even the threat of death, would immediately fill the air.

On such small signs and symbols does the southern cabala depend, and that is why I find the South so eerie and exhausting. This system of signs and nuances covers the mined terrain of the unspoken—the forever unspeakable—and everyone in the region knows his way across this field. This knowledge that a gesture can blow up a town is what the South refers to when it speaks of its “folkways.” The fact that the gesture is not made is what the South calls “excellent race relations.”

At the heart of this remarkable scene is a gesture in which the plasticity of form assumes its explosive dimension as *plastique*. Crucially, Baldwin posits this gesture in the mode of a fictional “as if.” In order to grasp the force of Baldwin’s “gesture that can blow up a town,” we need to consider how this fictional mode pervades his entire staging of the scene. The white woman encounters her black chauffeur *as if* she were “greeting a friend.” This moment of recognition does not belong to a different reality from Baldwin’s fictional response of reaching out his hand *as if* he found himself in a situation of reciprocity. These moments belong to the same reality. Or, to be precise, Baldwin’s genius here is to *put* them in the same reality so as to produce a truth about the situation he finds himself in as the only African American passenger, and a Northerner, waiting at the Tallahassee airport in 1960. The original meaning of “fiction” (*fingere*), as Jacques Rancière points out, is not “to feign” but “to forge,”¹ and the scene of recognition that

¹ Rancière, *Film Fables*, 158.

Baldwin stages here perfectly captures Rancière idea of “dissensus” as the “putting of two worlds in one world.”²

That this scene of dissensus is produced, or better forged, as opposed to “revealed” has everything to do with the distinction I’ve tried to develop between plastic recognition and the accepted sense of recognition, as operating a binary of mediation/immediacy. In this latter sense, Kierkegaard’s dismissive definition from *Fear and Trembling* is all too apt: “Whenever and wherever it is possible to speak of recognition, there is *eo ipso* a prior hiddenness.” Reading Baldwin’s scene through Kierkegaard, we would say that Baldwin’s account reveals the reality that underlies the white woman’s friendly greeting of her chauffeur in the “panic” and “horror” he imagines in her reaction to his own outstretched hand, just as truth of “excellent race relations” is found in the ever-present threat of violence. Or, pursuing the far more sanguine notion of recognition that we’ve traced from Balázs to Marco Iacoboni, we could say that the truth of Baldwin’s imagined encounter with the white woman is his instinctive urge to reciprocate (“If she were smiling at me that way I would expect to shake her hand”) and that the tragedy of the situation lies in the fact that this natural instinct has been suppressed on the side of the woman.

² For this Rancièrian aspect of my reading of Baldwin’s scene, I am entirely indebted to Jason Frank.

But contrary to these readings, to see this as a scene of *plastic* recognition is simply to acknowledge what Baldwin himself tells us: there is nothing to reveal because nothing is hidden. There is no confusion about where the landmines are placed, precisely what gesture and by whom will trigger the explosion. These things are marked if not spoken in the “system of signs and nuances” legible to all.³ Plastic recognition is therefore a thoroughly materialist concept, which is to say that its conditions of possibility are immanent to the concrete situation. What Baldwin recognizes as a Northerner is not some dark meaning lurking under the façade of a Southern white woman’s smile. It is nothing more nor less than the intricate precision with which the “folkways” of white supremacy are inscribed for all to see in the smallest of gestures.

³ Here we might affirm the truth of Deleuze’s definition of recognition as the “Everybody knows,” as a way of working against the grain of his dismissal of the concept as a dogmatic image of thought in *Difference and Repetition*.

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Biography

Abraham Geil was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 1971. He has a BA in American Studies and Philosophy from The Evergreen State College (1996), an MA in American Studies from The University of Iowa (2003), and a PhD from Duke University in Literature, with an emphasis on film studies and critical theory (2013). He is currently an Assistant Professor of Film Studies at the University of Amsterdam.